*As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”**Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the moneyto the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”*

A wealthy man was near death, and was sad because he had worked hard to amass a great fortune; he just couldn’t leave it all behind. Even though he knew that “You can’t take it with you,” he prayed for an exception. Suddenly, an angel appeared and announced that God had granted his request: he could take one suitcase of whatever he wanted into the afterlife. Overjoyed, the man hopped out of bed, found his largest suitcase, ran to his safe, filled his case with as many solid gold bars as could fit, and then lay down to die: at peace. Suddenly, he appeared before the Pearly Gates, dragging his heavy suitcase behind him. St. Peter welcomed him but asked to inspect the suitcase. St. Peter opened it, looked dumbfounded, pointed to the street beneath them, and said, “Pavement? You brought pavement?” The value systems of Heaven and Earth are very different.

Wealth is associated with an abundance of money. We value money for many reasons: for provision, protection, prestige, and for the kind of freedom to do the things that cannot be done without it. Money is a means to an end, a value-neutral tool. When I was a boy, a friend of my father—a wealth manager named Jim Stone who had a dark sense of human—told me, “Chris, money cannot buy you happiness. But it can buy you the freedom to wallow in the miseries of your own choosing.” He then followed up with, “Nevertheless, rich or poor, it’s nice to have money.” Money, actually, is the way we measure and communicate how much or how little we value, desire, or treasure things. We value cheap things as being worth $1; precious things we value at $100,000; $1,000,000; or are simply priceless. The value of the things we treasure change as our desire for them changes. In the 17th century, the Netherlands was gripped by “Tulip Fever:” The Dutch people were possessed by a cultural craze in which tulip plants and bulbs were so highly valued that they commanded astronomical prices. In one month the colorful flowery plant grew twenty-fold in value. People traded their land, their estates, and their life’s savings to acquire one *Semper Augustus* tulip bulb. And then, in 1637, the bubble burst, the market crashed, and all were ruined. Similarly, but in the opposite direction, petroleum oil used to be almost worthless. Only when the Western world learned what refined oil products could do for an economy that valued manufacturing and transportation did the inflation-adjusted cost of a barrel of oil between 1930 and 2010 increase 1,100%. And just a week ago, a painting of a girl with a red balloon by a British street and graffiti artist named Banksy—whose art is deeply coveted by modern collectors—sold at an auction for $1.4 million. To everyone’s shock, just as the gavel came down, the painting began to self-destruct, cutting itself into ribbons as it was designed to do by the artist. In response, collectors have interpreted that artwork’s self-destruction as a wholly new work of art, making it even more highly desired and, ironically, increasing its value. Money is a measuring stick for the value we place on a possession: tulips, petroleum oil, self-destructive Banksy paintings, or freedom. We feel wealthy when we possess an abundance of the thing we value the most.

In today’s Gospel reading, a man approaches Jesus and addresses Him by saying, “Good Master.” The man values goodness: he has paid attention to Jesus, he has seen His good work, he has concluded that Jesus is good, and he is drawn to Him. When the man asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”, Jesus lists the second half of the Ten Commandments: the ones that concern good behavior among people. The man responds that he has lived by those commandments ever since he was a little boy. This is not bragging; this is a cry for help. The man has worked as hard as he could for his entire life to be a good boy, a good man, and a good person. But something seems missing; in spite of his goodness, he still hasn’t found what he’s looking for. Jesus hears this, and His heart warms with affection for him because Jesus also values goodness. With deep kindness, Jesus offers him a healing prescription: He must sell his possessions, give the sales’ money to the poor, and then follow Him. And the man walks away because, as the Gospel says, “he had many possessions.” The Greek word we translate as “possessions” is *ktema*; it usually means land, fields, or farms. The man does not have an abundance of cash. All of his wealth in locked in his land and its produce. He would have to convert his land into cash to give it to the poor, which would mean that his estate and his revenue would be gone forever. As much as he truly values goodness, he values his land even more. He cannot let go of it, much less leave it behind even for Jesus.

Why would a person who is drawn to goodness, who wants to be good, and who behaves like a good person refuse to surrender his abundant lands and walk away from Jesus, the true and authentic source of abundant goodness? Perhaps it is because of what his land does for him in a way that is beyond economics. He had followed God’s commandments since his childhood—all 613 of the commandments that Moses established. As part of that Law, he had given God at least ten percent of everything he earned before he did anything else: he had given a tithe. Tithing is a good thing; it is what God asks. But his tithing from his land has an additional benefit: it makes him see himself and be seen by others as generous, pious, and good. Without an ability to earn, he would be without an ability to give from his earnings. Without an ability to give, he would be without the way through which he sees himself and is seen by others as good. In other words, if he sold his land he would surrender the formula that justifies his existence; he would have to come to terms with how the good God loves him not for what the good he does but for who he is: a self-absorbed but beloved child of God—as are we. This loss would have felt like death, like a profound and humiliating loss: it would have felt like a taking up a cross.

There are people in the world who desperately try to find acceptance and value by doing whatever makes them feel and be seen as a good person. This craving for acceptance and value is linked and fueled by being admired, appreciated or simply liked by others. A spouse who constantly tries to make his or her partner happy so that he will feel loved, approved, and like a good spouse. A child who constantly and anxiously tries to win the affection of her parents so that she will feel loved, approved, and a good girl. A friend who constantly lets herself be exploited by others so that she will feel connected, befriended, not lonely, and a good friend. Even some clergy do this; after 25 years of ordained life, I know something about it. If I preach, visit, teach or lead you so that I might always please you and might always be liked by you, then I do not truly serve you: instead, I serve myself and my own emotional needs. Sometimes, to truly do good for the congregations they serve, clergy must say or do things that risk their flock’s disapproval by initiating change and presenting a challenge, which always triggers anxiety. (Don’t worry; I don’t currently have any plans to do so.) Sometimes, to follow Jesus, spouses, children, friends, or clergy who want to be liked must walk away from their addiction to admiration and simply follow Jesus for His own sake: to know and share heart-felt repentance, authentic forgiveness, radical truth, and self-giving love. Any other attempt to justify ourselves and feel liked by others eventually becomes something that centers of all our thoughts, feelings, and actions; something for which we will do anything; something for which we will even turn away from God. The desire to see ourselves and be admired by others as good inevitably become an idol, and all idols eventually becomes demons: limitlessly exhausting and ultimately devouring compulsions.

It is one thing to want to be good as an act of obedience or a gesture of gratitude to God. It is entirely another to perform good actions because we want to declare our own goodness and earn the approval of others. It is not a bad thing to try to be good, to do what God commands, to love Him with all that we are and all that we have, and to do what is best and healthiest for the people we know as we do what is best and healthiest for ourselves. But, as T.S. Eliot wrote in his play *Murder in the Cathedral*, “The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason.” We do not put the cart before the horse; we do not believe that our any of good actions and selfless behavior precede God’s approval of us. In fact, it is exhausting and fatally damaging to constantly try to do good and be good with the specific intention of finally feel approved and loved by everyone, or even anyone. God does not want us to afflict ourselves with that superficial standard. He has offered Himself, in the person of Jesus, to be our justification; while we are not good, He is, and because we have been made One with Him, we participate and share in His goodness. He does all of this not because we are good, but because He is, and He loves us just as we are.

You may get weary of me constantly saying that God loves us just as we are, that He loves so much that in the Person of Jesus He died to rescue us from self-destruction, and that He loves us not because we are useful but because He simply loves us. I say it so often because I need to hear it so often. Jesus did not become Incarnate, be born, live, die, and then rise from the grave so that we can constantly try harder to improve ourselves, to try harder to become the best version of ourselves, and to do all that we can to be good and thereby to earn the love of God. But, as wearying as it may be to hear this message over and over again, it is the Gospel, the good news: Christ crucified and risen is the ultimate expression of God’s love for us. There is no other way. The only abundance we need, the only thing we need to value above all is God’s affection, approval, mercy, and forgiveness. We treasure above all things His grace: His one-way love toward us. Like the abundant possessions of the man who spoke with and then turned away from Jesus, all other ways for self-justification must be left behind; and ultimately, every other way will be.

At the funeral of the multi-millionaire Aristotle Onassis, the Greek shipping magnate who become one of the most wealthy and famous men of his time, two of his wealthy friends speculated about Ari’s estate. One asked the other, “How much did he leave?” The other replied, “Man, he left it all.”