

Sheep Don't Keep Track: Stop Measuring Your Moral Progress

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail: Never Sorry Enough

by George F. Borghardt III

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Dear Journal Reader,

This is the new edition of *Issues, Etc. Journal*.

In this edition you'll find two articles. In the first, *Sheep Don't Keep Track*, I answer questions like, "What are the Christian's good works good for?" or "Is the Christian life all about measuring your personal moral progress?" This article is especially needful now, since popular "outcome-based ministries" are encouraging Christians to trust in their own good works rather than in Christ.

Never Sorry Enough is our "Wittenberg Trail" feature telling the story of Pastor George Borghardt's journey from the frying pan of Roman Catholic works-righteousness, to the fire of pop-Evangelical works-righteousness, and then finally to freedom and certainty of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.

Also, check out our Find a Church section at the end of the Journal.

Enjoy this come-back edition of the Journal.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host **Issues, Etc.**



by Todd Wilken

It is one of the most puzzling parables Jesus ever told: The parable of the Sheep and the Goats. It is set on Judgment Day. All humanity is gathered before Jesus. He separates mankind into "sheep" and "goats." Matthew writes:

And He will place the sheep on His right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' (Matthew 25:33-36)

Now, at this point in the story, the sheep seem surprised. More than that, they seem to have no recollection of the good works Jesus says they did. They ask, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?"

Have you ever wondered how the sheep could come to Judgment Day apparently unaware that their earthly lives had been overflowing with good works?

How am I Doing?

This was the question of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. Everything in the Catholic system of merits was geared toward measuring the Christian's moral progress: penance, indulgences, the invocation of saints, the sacrifice of the mass, purgatory, etc.

In the face of all this, Martin Luther made a seemingly heretical statement:

Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins. Human works appear attractive outwardly, but within they are filthy, as Christ says concerning the Pharisees in Matt. 23:27. For they appear to the doer and others good and beautiful, yet God does not judge according to appearances but searches the minds and hearts. (The Heidelberg Disputation, 3)

If Luther was right, this presented a serious problem for those who wanted to track their moral progress. My works may appear good, but how do I know if they really are good? If I can't tell if my works are really good, then how can I know how I'm doing? This question undermined Rome's entire system for measuring the Christian's moral progress.

Luther's idea presents the very same problem today. Only today, Rome isn't the only game in town. Today, the churches of pop-American Protestantism stand ready to help you track your moral progress too. There are books, seminars and sermon

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series, all designed to help you answer the question: "How am I doing?"

Whether it's medieval Rome, or today's Protestantism, it's all about measuring your moral progress. Why are so many Christians asking, "How am I doing?"

Several reasons come to mind. Some Christians want to compare their present with their past. Some want to compare themselves with others.

Some want to reach a personal moral goal. Some want evidence that they really are Christians. Some Christians want to boast before God.

As you can see, there are all sorts of reasons that a Christian might want to measure his progress in Sanctification. But none of them are good.

Christians Do Progress in Good Works.

Am I saying a Christian doesn't grow in good works? No. I am saying that a Christian can't measure his own growth in good works.

I know that this flies in the face of almost every popular preacher out there. Entire congregations and careers have been built on the idea that keeping track of your good works is essential to the Christian life. It isn't.

I know that this contradicts all the Christian self-help bestsellers. Christian publishing success is fueled by the notion that you can —indeed, must— measure your growth in good works. You can't, nor do you need to.

I know that this is counter-intuitive. We think that Sanctification should be like losing weight: eat right and exercise, and you should be able to measure the results in a shrinking waistline. Not so.

Your growth in good works is certain, but you cannot see it.

I know that this will come as a disappointment to some readers. It will mean that a lot of your time and effort has been wasted keeping track of your works. But read on, I will tell you about a much better way to spend your time, effort and works.

Scripture is clear; Christians do grow in good works. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians:

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. (2 Thessalonians 1:3)

And the Apostle Peter wrote:

Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:5-8)

More than that, this growth and increase in good works is not the product of human effort, but it is God's own doing. Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all." And, to the Philippians:

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1: 6) and,

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in your both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13)

Your growth in good works is a clear promise of God. But as with every promise of God, we walk by faith and not by sight. Your growth in good works is certain, but you cannot see it.

You say, "Wilken, you're simply wrong. I **can** see and measure my growth in good works." I ask, "What is your standard of measurement?"

I am the Least Qualified to Measure My Own Works.

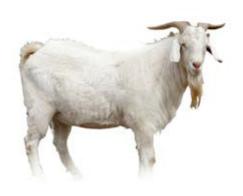
First, what is a good work? Only God can answer that question. Only God is good (Luke 18:19). So, only God is qualified to judge whether a work is good or not.

When it comes to our works, God doesn't grade on a curve. There is no sliding scale with God. With God, good means perfect. By God's standard,

a good work means sinless obedience to His commandments, from a pure heart.

Take the greatest commandment for example. It says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37) All means all, and anything less than all is sin.

An ordinary measuring stick is divided into units such as inches or feet. But God's measuring stick of perfection has no such divisions. There is only one unit of measurement - perfection. There may be 1/2 and 1/4 inches, but there are no 1/2 or 1/4 perfections. Measuring my works by God's standard of perfection is like measuring my height using an infinitely long ruler with no marking for inches or feet. Any result would be nonsense.



You see, God's standard of measurement is the only one that counts. Our growth in good works isn't measured by comparing ourselves with our past, with others, or with our own personal moral goals. Our growth in good works is measured by comparing ourselves with God's perfect standard. And only God can do that. Only God can see your growth in good works.

Second, I am hardly an impartial observer. Even if I could measure my own works by God's standard, I couldn't be trusted to render an accurate measurement. I am always inclined to pad the numbers, give myself the benefit of the doubt and let myself off the hook. I am willfully blind to my own sinful motives. And, if Scripture is right, I am especially prone to self-deception. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)

Finally, as we have seen, for a work to be truly good, it must be completely selfless. So, ask yourself: Are my reasons for measuring my moral progress selfless? Whether your reason is to compare your present

with your past, to compare yourself with others, to reach your personal moral goal, to prove that you really are a Christian, or to boast before God, if you are doing your good works for any of those reasons, you are only serving yourself.

Wicked Saints, Holy Sinners

Someone may say, "I may never be sinless, but at least I can sin less." That's a laudable goal, but like measuring your moral progress, how would you ever know if you were sinning less?

Yes, a Christian progresses in good works. But does he thereby sin less? Remember, the standard is perfection. Anything short of perfection is sin.

Well into his life as a Christian, the

Apostle Paul wrote: "The saying is trustworthy
and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to
save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." (1 Timothy 1:15) How could Paul
refer to himself as the foremost of sinners? Hadn't Paul progressed in his
Sanctification? Of course he had. But even then, he remained the same
sinner he was before Jesus met him on the Damascus road.

What is key in Paul's words is the sentence, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Sinners aren't measured by how much more or less they sin. They are measured by their pervasive sinful condition that puts them in need of the perfect, sinless sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

Forget trying to measure whether you're sinning less. Are you still a sinner? Do you still need Jesus? If, in all your efforts to measure your moral progress, you find even one of your works that doesn't measure up to God perfect standard, then the answer to both questions is "yes."

So, What Are Good Works Good For?

At this point, you might be asking, "What use are my good works, if I can't use them to measure my progress?"

The truth is, your good works don't do you any good at all. Your good works don't help you one bit. Your good works are completely useless to you.

Your good works aren't for you; your good works are for your neighbor. This is the only thing your good works are good for: loving and serving your neighbor.

Many Christians think of their good works like ornaments on a Christmas tree, hanging there, inert, just to make the tree look good. Your good works aren't ornaments; they are living fruit — fruit for the picking. The fruit isn't there to make the tree look good. The fruit is there for people to pick off and use.

Jesus says, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) Your Father in heaven isn't glorified when you look good (in your own eyes or in the eyes of others). Your Father in heaven is glorified when your neighbor is served.

This brings us back to the surprised sheep of Jesus' parable in Matthew 25. They are surprised when Jesus tells them about all their good works. They don't remember seeing Jesus hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick or in prison. They don't remember doing any of the good works Jesus says they did. Why?

The sheep didn't spend their lives measuring their moral progress.

They weren't keeping track. They weren't using their good works as milestones of their moral improvement. The sheep spent their lives trusting in the perfect good works of Jesus. Therefore, they spent their good works on "the least of these my brothers."

This is how it is supposed to work. Rather than use their good works to gauge their own progress, the sheep used their good works to serve their neighbors.

But the sheep aren't the only ones surprised on Judgment day. The goats are equally surprised, but for a different reason:

Then [the King] will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his

The goats will have works, but their works will be all that they will have.

angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me ·no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' (Matthew 25:41-44)

The goats are surprised. They are certain that they never saw Jesus hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick or in prison. The goats are certain that if they did see Jesus, they would have ministered to Him.

After all, many of the greatest do-gooders, philanthropists and humanitarians in history will be among the goats on Judgment Day. All of them will be able to recite long litanies of their good works. Some will be able to cite history books attesting to their selfless deeds. Others will have itemized tax returns and receipts proving what, when and to whom they gave. Others will have personal journals and diaries chronicling their lives of works.

All of the goats will have kept track in some way or another. Each of the goats will be able to show clear evidence of his moral improvement over a lifetime.

Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these

will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25:45-46; see also Matthew 7:22-23)

So much for measuring your moral progress. The goats will have works — lifetimes of carefully tabulated works done for themselves. The goats will have their works, but their works will be all that they will have. Luther writes:

To trust in works, which one ought to do in fear, is equivalent to giving oneself the honor and taking it from God, to whom fear is due in connection with every work. But this is completely wrong, namely to please oneself, to enjoy oneself in one's works, and to adore oneself as an idol. (Martin Luther, The Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 7)

Christ - Our Sanctification

If God's standard is perfection, do any of my works measure up? No. Are any of my good works good enough? No.

My motives are always mixed. I never do as much as I should. My works are far from perfect. And God demands perfection! Do my good works please God? In his *Treatise on Good Works*, Luther asked the same question:

How can I trust surely that all my works are pleasing to God, when at times I fall, and talk, eat, drink and sleep too much, or otherwise transgress, as I cannot help doing?

Luther's answer:

Yes, this confidence and faith must be so high and strong that the man knows that all his life and works are nothing but damnable sins before God's judgment, as it is written, Psalm 143: "In thy sight shall no man living be justified"; and he must entirely despair of his works, believing that they cannot be good except through this faith, which looks for no judgment, but only for pure grace, favor, kindness and mercy.... See, thus are works forgiven, are without guilt and are good, not by their own nature, but by the mercy and grace of God because of the faith which trusts on the mercy of God. Therefore we must fear because of the works, but comfort ourselves because of the grace of God. (Martin

Luther, A Treatise on Good Works, Adolph Spaeth, L.D. Reed, Henry Jacobs, trans. and eds. (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915), Vol. 1, pp. 283-285.)

Scripture says, "Without faith, it is impossible to please God." (Hebrews 11:6)
But with faith in the perfect good works of Jesus Christ, it is not only possible to please God; it is impossible not to please him.

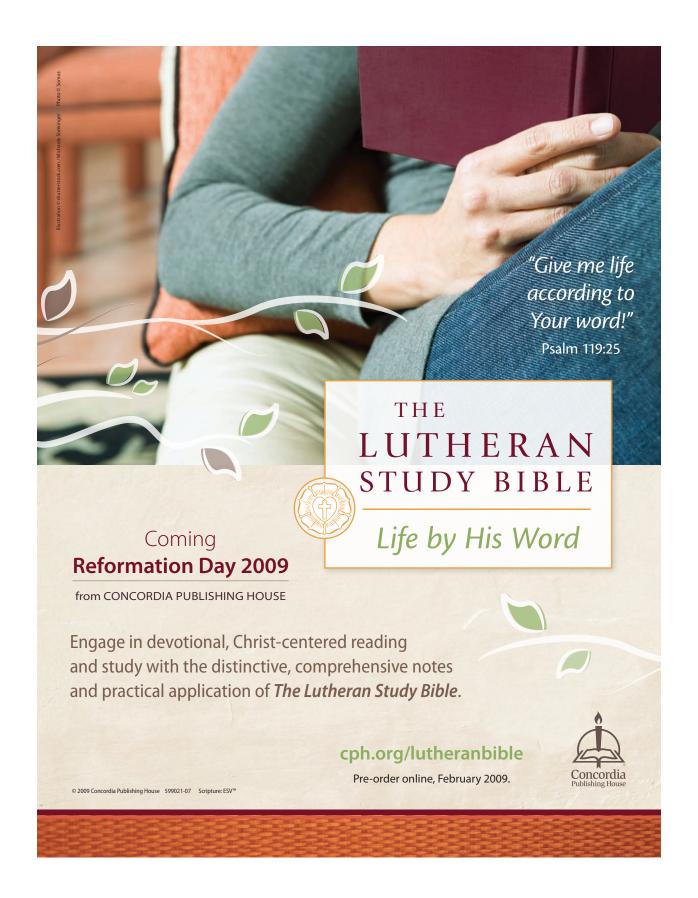


You are pleasing to God, not because of what you do or don't do. You are pleasing to

God because of what Jesus did for you. Jesus' life, death and resurrection fully met God's standard of perfection. Jesus' life of perfect good works substitutes for your life of sin and less-than-perfect good works. Jesus is your substitute, not only in your Justification, but also in your Sanctification. Paul writes:

You are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 1:30-31)

Go, trust in Jesus, live for your neighbor. Confess your sins. Confess your good works too. Receive Jesus' forgiveness. Trust the mercy of God in Jesus. Stop spending your time and effort trying to track your growth in good works. Instead, spend your time, effort and works on your neighbor in need. Stop measuring your moral progress. Remember, sheep don't keep track, because sheep know they don't need to.



Wittenberg Trail



There I was, eleven years old and in Confession. I had stolen candy from the candy jar and hidden the wrappers under my brother's bed. My brilliantly evil plan went off without a hitch! My parents punished my brother for taking the candy. But a few days later, the real story came out. My pious Roman Catholic mother had my father drag me straight to Confession. After all, liars and thieves go to hell.

Then began the tears – real ones. Have you ever done something so evil that you shock yourself? And try as you can to think that you couldn't possibly have done it, that you really aren't that person who did such a terrible thing...you are.

"Give me like fifty Hail Mary's and Our Fathers, Father. I know the Creed, make me say it a few times too. Let me make up for this," I begged the priest. I knew that if Jesus would just give me a chance, I could show Him that I'm not really a thief and a liar.

"My son, you are sorry enough." What else could the priest say to a weeping eleven-year-old? He tried to comfort me with the idea that with my tearful remorse, I had done enough penance already.

That was easy! I didn't even have to do any additional acts of penance! I had earned forgiveness by being sorry. That was my penance.

I quickly learned that thinking I was doing well enough at not sinning, or was sorry enough to be forgiven for the sins that I did commit, would never bring me any lasting comfort. How could it when there was always more room for improvement? A person can convince himself that he's really doing his best and everything is peachy-keen between him and the Lord God Almighty for only so long. What follows that kind of self-righteousness is despair and unbelief.

Who wants that kind of God anyway? Why would any one want a God who demands something from you, and then is never satisfied with what you do? Are you really sorry enough? Have you really done enough?

The forgiveness seemed free. But it wasn't actually free, was it?

So, I ran from God. I stopped going to Mass every Sunday. What did it matter? I never measured up, anyway. Whether the Lord God existed or not just didn't matter to me. I figured that if there was such a thing as God, I'd at least get credit when I died for not being a full-blown atheist.

The Evangelicals I encountered in high school had a different answer: Give your life to Jesus, then you can go to heaven. Possibly. Maybe. You are a better Christian if you do all the right things; you can actually save yourself from death. You do your part, He'll do His thing. Pray a prayer, make yourself God's child, and God will love you.

I didn't notice at the time that this was the same religion as Rome. There's no real difference between a religion that says you must do something to be forgiven by God and a religion that says you must do something to become a child of God. Both religions begin and end with you doing something to get God's attention. And the most scary thing of all – both begin with self-righteousness and end in despair.



"It's free. It's free. All you have to do is...," they say. But that's not free at all! It can't be free, it's not grace, if you are still required to do something. The more I failed to do, the more despair I felt.

"If you truly believed, really believed, then you'd have victory in your life." But, deep down, I knew I really

wasn't good enough. One sin would be conquered and two others would appear.

More religion requires more works. But when victory didn't come from all my efforts, when I couldn't rid myself of those sins, it meant just one thing: "You must not really believe."

I just happened to have a Lutheran friend who invited me to her church. In her church I heard something that I had never heard before: the Gospel.

Not only did Jesus die on the cross for the sin of the world, but He had died **for me**. Not only had Jesus risen from the dead on the third day, but He had risen from the dead **for me**! He lives now and He lives now **for me**! You too! The "for you" is the Gospel!

Faith receives! It's not a work we do, something that makes us lovable to God. Faith is given by the Holy Spirit in the Word, the water, and the Sacrament. I had never heard this news before!

Christ has died precisely for sinners who don't believe, who aren't sorry enough for their sin, who cannot save themselves – even for me. God loves me, not because I'm lovable, but in the giving of His Son. That's the love God has for the world – the Father gave up His Son for us!

No more looking inside. No more fear. No more despair. No more worrying about whether I am sorry enough to be forgiven and knowing deep down that I am not. I have got to repent of all of that. Salvation is actually outside of me – in the waters of my Baptism, in the preached and read Word, in the Body and Blood of Christ which deliver the forgiveness of sins won by Christ to me.

That makes salvation certain, doesn't it? How could I know that my sins have really been forgiven? Christ died and rose for me. How do I know that God will not hold something against me? He has washed away my sins in Baptism. How do I know for sure that I'll be in heaven on the Last Day? The Father has fed me the Body and Blood of His Son for the remission of all my sins. Apart from my sorriness, outside of my trying harder, God delivers His salvation to me. To you, too.

I wonder sometimes if I should thank God for that priest. Had he given me those "Our Fathers," would I be a Lutheran today? I don't know. But what I do know is that when my sons do the things that I did when I was younger, they will not hear that they are forgiven because they are "sorry enough." No, they will hear free forgiveness achieved by our Lord on the cross and delivered to them in the words, "I forgive you all your sins."

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