

# The true path to spiritual growth

## Are spiritual disciplines necessary for spiritual formation?

The underlying principle behind Spiritual Disciplines and Spiritual Formation is spiritual growth by human effort. To grow spiritually one must do one's spiritual disciplines, as Richard J. Foster makes very clear in his article *Spiritual Formation: A Pastoral Letter*, in which he writes, "Frankly, no Spiritual Disciplines, no Spiritual Formation." So, one had better do one's disciplines or spiritual growth won't happen. The dust jacket on Foster's 25<sup>th</sup> Edition of *Celebration of Discipline* reinforces this point by saying it's "only by and through these practices that the true path to spiritual growth can be found." In other words, there is no other way but the practice of spiritual disciplines if one wishes to grow spiritually.

The true path to spiritual growth that Paul found, however, did not involve any required practices or disciplines. He took the path of "not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but from that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith," **Philippians 3:9**. To Paul, Christ was the only "true path to spiritual growth," not the law and all its disciplines and practices anymore.

That hadn't always been the path Paul had taken, though. As a Pharisee, he'd relied heavily on law-keeping for his spiritual formation, a pursuit he described later as "confidence in the flesh (verses 3-4)." But when he saw the reason why Christ died and what that opened up instead, he trashed confidence in the flesh for confidence in Christ. The practice of disciplines he thought had been the only true path to righteousness, or spiritual formation, he now considered a load of "rubbish (verse 8)."

It must have been excruciatingly difficult for Paul, then, to watch the Galatian church go back to "relying on observing the law," **Galatians 3:10**, or back to "confidence in the flesh" for their spiritual growth. "Are you so foolish?" he asked them, "After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" **verse 3**. They'd started off so well, trusting entirely in the wonderful promise of the Spirit opened up by the death of Christ, but here they were going back to trusting in their own efforts again.

So he asked them, "Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles (spiritual growth) among you because you observe the law? (verse 5)" Was this what they were thinking, that God would only give them the Spirit if they kept up their

practice of the law? Was this why they were going back to depending on their own efforts, because they believed that the Spirit would only be active in their lives if they were doing their part? The same question could be asked today, too: Does God only give us the Spirit to work the miracle of spiritual formation among us because we're doing our spiritual disciplines? Does the miracle of spiritual growth only occur if we're doing something toward it ourselves?

But who had “bewitched” them into thinking that, Paul asked? The purpose of Christ dying for them and redeeming them was “in order that (**Galatians 3:14**) the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the (miracle working) Spirit.” It's by faith that the Spirit works in us, not by law-keeping or a list of disciplines that we do.

Paul was deeply disturbed, then, to see the Galatians go back to thinking they had to keep the law, because “if righteousness (or spiritual formation) could be gained through the law (or spiritual disciplines), Christ died for nothing!” **Galatians 2:21**. What was the point of Christ dying if spiritual formation could be created by human effort? Christ died so that we could receive the gift of the Spirit, so that our spiritual formation would no longer depend on anything we ourselves do. “The life I live in the body,” Paul writes, “I live by faith in the Son of God (verse 20).”

That was the “blessing” promised to us through Abraham, that our righteousness, our spiritual formation, would come by faith (**3:6-9**). In contrast, what a “curse” it is to have to rely on things that we must do to create righteousness, like law-keeping or disciplines, because if we're relying on spiritual disciplines for our spiritual formation then we'd better be doing all our disciplines properly or we won't grow spiritually, just like Israel was cursed if they didn't “continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law (verse 10).” If righteousness or spiritual growth depends on keeping up with a list of rules and disciplines then we're under an enormous burden, of worrying what happens to us spiritually if we don't fulfill our part perfectly. But, Richard Foster says, “no Spiritual Disciplines, no Spiritual Formation,” so we'd better do them, or else!

But, Paul writes, “now that faith has come we are no longer under the supervision of the law (verse 25).” Righteousness and spiritual growth are no longer ruled by law, or things that we must do. It is “by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope (Galatians 5:5).” Our righteousness is now supervised by the Spirit. The Spirit now supplies all the love, power and self-discipline we need to bring in a full harvest of righteousness. All we do is “keep in step with the Spirit (5:25).” How? By obeying the law, or by practicing spiritual disciplines? No, it's by faith, because “if a law (or a discipline) had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law (**3:21**).” But no such law exists, so the only way we can become righteous is by

trusting in the Spirit. “The righteous live by faith (Galatians 3:11),” because when it comes to our spiritual formation there is no other choice!

Righteousness is “given through faith in Jesus Christ...given to those who believe (verse 22).” Believe in what, though? Believe in the promise God made to Abraham, that through Christ the Spirit would be given to us so that the Spirit would perform the miracle of spiritual formation and righteousness in us, not the law or human effort. The true path to spiritual growth, therefore, is not created by anything we do. To rely on human effort, according to Paul, is putting our “confidence in the flesh,” which he ditched totally in favour of putting all his confidence in Christ.

Richard Foster, however, would rather we place total confidence in disciplines. “No Spiritual Disciplines, no Spiritual Formation,” he says. It’s interesting to note, then, how Dallas Willard describes spiritual disciplines in his book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. He writes, “Although we call the disciplines ‘spiritual’ - they never fail to require specific acts and dispositions of our body as we engage in them...the disciplines cannot be carried out except as our body and its parts are surrendered in precise ways and definite actions to God (page 11).” Oh, so the spiritual disciplines may be called “spiritual” but they in fact involve the body. With that in mind, Richard Foster’s statement would read more accurately as, “No bodily disciplines, no spiritual formation.”

Spiritual formation, then, depends hugely on the practice of one’s bodily disciplines, or putting one’s “confidence in the flesh.” And that’s exactly where Dallas Willard would like us to put our confidence when he writes, “The disciplines are activities of the mind and body purposely undertaken, to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order...the harmonization of our total self with God will not be done for us. We must act (page 68).” The italicized emphasis in that quote is the author’s, to make it very clear to the reader that “cooperation with the divine order” and “harmonization with God” is up to us and the activities of mind and body that we ourselves perform. For spiritual growth to happen, one must act. How? Through the practice of mental and bodily disciplines. Why? Because that’s the only way spiritual formation happens. Dallas Willard calls this “the body’s role in redemption (page 40).” Paul would call it “confidence in the flesh.” It’s spiritual growth by human effort.

“But,” Dallas Willard explains, “thoughtful and religiously devout people of the classical and Hellenistic world, from the Ganges to the Tiber, knew that the mind and body of the human being had to be rigorously disciplined to achieve a decent individual and social existence (page 99).” That may be true for achieving a “decent existence” but does it apply to spiritual formation? The Pharisees, for instance, were a “religiously devout people” who rigorously disciplined their minds and bodies, but it didn’t do anything for them spiritually, did it? That’s why Paul ditched his old Pharisaical disciplines of mind and body. As a means of

attaining righteousness, or spiritual formation, they were useless. The only true path to righteousness is faith in Christ (Gals 2:15-16).

But didn't Paul support the idea of "rigorous discipline" when he said "I beat my body and make it my slave?" **1 Corinthians 9:27**. In context, however, he's not talking about bodily discipline for spiritual formation, he's talking about disciplining himself to preach the gospel (**verses 16-23**). "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" he writes in **verse 16**. This is what drove him. Like an athlete in training, he never let up. He pushed himself relentlessly "for the sake of the gospel (**verse 23**)," refusing support so he could offer the gospel free of charge (**verse 18**), making himself a "slave to everyone to win as many as possible (**verse 19**)." This was the life of sacrificial service God had chosen him for. He daren't let up, then, or let himself get lazy or flounder around aimlessly. God had given him a job to do with a wonderful prize at the end of it, "a crown that will last forever (**verse 25**)," so he wasn't going to let his bodily weaknesses get the better of him and disqualify him from receiving that prize. In context, Paul is talking about disciplining himself to get the gospel out effectively, not disciplining himself for spiritual formation.

But when Paul tells Timothy to "train yourself to be godly," **1 Timothy 4:7**, isn't that talking about disciplining oneself for spiritual formation? No, because in context Paul isn't issuing a general command to all Christians to discipline themselves for spiritual formation, he's specifically advising a young minister to "be diligent (**verse 15**)" in both his life and teaching to help protect the people in his care from being deceived. He's encouraging Timothy to be "a good minister of Christ Jesus (**verse 6**)" by sticking to the "truths of the faith" and the "good teaching" he'd received to combat "deceiving spirits (**verse 1**)" that were influencing people into believing and teaching "godless myths and old wives' tales (**verse 7**)." "So, watch your life and doctrine closely," Paul tells Timothy in **verse 16**, "persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers (from deception by demons)." Paul knows what Timothy is up against, so he's encouraging him personally to keep his life well-grounded at all times in the truths he'd been taught, because that's what he'd been gifted as a minister for, to inspire the church by his example (**12**), his teaching (**13**) and his progress (**15**).

To interpret **1 Timothy 4:7** and **1 Corinthians 9:27** instead, as disciplines of mind and body that all Christians must do for spiritual formation, would make Paul contradict himself, because in **2 Corinthians 3**, Paul says it's the "ministry of the Spirit (**verse 8**)" that "brings righteousness (**verse 9**)," and in **verse 18** that we "are being transformed into his (Christ's) likeness, with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." Spiritual formation into Christ's likeness is entirely the Spirit's job. With a clear statement like that, why would Paul then say our spiritual formation involves something we have to do as well, like training ourselves in godliness or beating our bodies into submission? Not only would he be contradicting himself, he'd also be opening himself up to being

asked the same question he asked the Galatians: “After beginning with the Spirit, are you (Paul) now trying to attain your goal by human effort?”

This highlights where Dallas Willard and Paul differ. They agree on the importance of transformation into Christ’s likeness, but it’s in the method by which we are transformed that they differ. The goal of spiritual formation, as defined by Dallas Willard, is “living as he (Jesus) lived in the entirety of his life - adopting his overall lifestyle (*The Spirit of the Disciplines*, page 5).” And how (in Mr. Willard’s mind) does it happen? “We have to discover how to enter into his (Christ’s) disciplines (page 9),” or as he also writes, it’s “simply a matter of following Jesus into his own practices.” In other words, if we want to become like Jesus we simply train ourselves to practice the same disciplines Jesus practiced. But that’s not what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18; he says we become like Christ because of the Spirit’s action in us. The Spirit does the transforming, not us.

Ah but, Richard Foster would argue, spiritual disciplines are the means by which the Spirit transforms us. The Spirit does the transforming, yes, he would agree, but we still need the disciplines “as a means of receiving God’s grace (*Celebration of Discipline*, page 7),” because what the disciplines do is “allow us to place ourselves before God so he can transform us (page 7).” Oh, so the way God transforms us is if we first “place ourselves” before him. And how do we do that? By doing our disciplines. There is a work, then, that we must perform before God can transform us. We’d better do our part first or we won’t have “placed ourselves before God” correctly enough for God to act on our behalf. We must work to receive God’s grace: No disciplines from us, no spiritual formation from the Spirit. Imagine a Dad treating his child that way: “No good behaviour from you, kid, and you get no help from me.”

But, Richard Foster writes, that’s the way God ordained it: “The disciplines are the God-ordained means by which each of us is enabled to bring the little individualized power pack we all possess - we call it the human body - and place it before God as a ‘living sacrifice’ (Romans 12:1). It is the way we go about training in the spiritual life. By means of this process we become, through time and experience, the kind of person who lives naturally and freely in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (*Pastoral Letter January 18, 2004*).”

Does that mean, Mr. Foster, that God will only give me his Spirit to work miracles in me, because I’m “going about my training in the spiritual life” by doing my disciplines? Or, as Paul put it to the Galatians: “Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law?” **Galatians 3:5**. No, the reason the Spirit began to produce all those lovely fruits mentioned above was, according to Paul, “because you believe what you heard (5).” And what is it they heard? “Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified

(Galatians 3:1),” and through that crucifixion “he redeemed us...so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (14).”

The means by which the Galatians “received God’s grace” and the transforming power of the Spirit wasn’t because they used spiritual disciplines to “place themselves before God,” it was Christ crucified opening up the promise of the Spirit. When the Galatians heard the gospel preached by Paul, that through Christ crucified the Spirit would be given to them so that the Spirit would perform the miracle of righteousness in them, not the law or their human efforts anymore, they believed it. And that’s when the miracle-working Spirit began to transform them. It was obviously the way God ordained it, too, because on hearing and believing, the evidence of the Spirit growing them spiritually soon became apparent - enough for Paul to be able to ask them, “Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?” **verse 2.** They knew enough about the Spirit’s working in their lives already, to know the answer.

So, how could they revert back to thinking, like Richard Foster in his *Pastoral Letter, January 18, 2004*, that the disciplines “constitute the way God has given us for intentionally training ourselves in godliness (1 Timothy 4:7)?” That was the old way of trying to make themselves righteous by human effort. But Paul said, “Consider Abraham: ‘He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,’ Galatians 3:6. Righteousness wasn’t credited to Abraham because he “intentionally trained himself in godliness,” it was credited to him because “he believed God.” And that’s exactly how it would be for us, too, “that God would justify the Gentiles by faith (verse 8).” That was the gospel given “in advance to Abraham (8)” and that’s the gospel now, that it’s by faith in Christ “who loved me and gave himself for me (2:20)” that God gives us his Spirit to work miracles in us, credits righteousness to us and justifies us. That’s the way God ordained it, that “those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (9).” So, “What then shall we say?” Paul asks, “That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith,” **Romans 9:30.**

And even the faith is not ours, too. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do,” **Ephesians 2:8-10.** Every part of our spiritual formation, including the ability to “do good works” and even our faith, is all God’s doing. It is all by grace; it is all a gift. And what was the means by which we received this marvellous gift? “To those who through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours,” **2 Peter 1:1.** It’s not by our disciplines that we receive grace or faith, it is entirely through Christ’s righteousness. There is no room for pride, then, in our having contributed something to our spiritual growth, because we don’t do anything toward it. From beginning to end, we are the product of God’s workmanship. And if we happen to believe that, well, that’s God’s doing, too!

Michael J. Feazell supports this point exactly, when he wrote in 2001 that “the goal the Holy Spirit has for me is that I be conformed to the image of Christ and the Spirit gives me the faith to rest in his power to bring that about.” The Spirit does everything. The Spirit sets the goal, it’s the Spirit’s power by which that goal is fulfilled, and it’s the Spirit that gives me the trust in him to fulfill that goal in me. It’s all the Spirit’s doing. I don’t have to “place myself before God” by practicing spiritual disciplines for the Spirit’s power to conform me to Christ’s image or to enable me “to do good works” - not at all -because the Spirit gives me the faith to trust him to do it. It’s the Spirit’s gift. It’s one of those marvellous “miracles” Paul talked about in Galatians 3:5, that the Spirit was working in the lives of the Galatians, that they knew had been happening to them for no effort of their own.

So why would Peter tell us to “make your calling and election sure,” **2 Peter 1:10**, if our spiritual formation is entirely the Spirit’s doing? And doesn’t Peter also say, “For if you do these things, you will never fall,” which surely suggests there is something we must do to prevent ourselves going backwards spiritually - doesn’t it? He also tells us to “make every effort (verse 5)” to “add to your faith goodness; and to goodness knowledge, etc (verses 5-7)” because “if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (verse 8).”

But how do we get these qualities in increasing measure? How do we add goodness to faith, etc? Is there something we must do to get them? No, because according to Peter in verse 3, they’re a gift: “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and goodness (verse 3),” and “Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (verse 4).” In context, it’s all about promises and gifts. Whether it’s adding spiritual qualities in increasing measure, or participating in the divine nature, or escaping the world’s corruption, it’s all a gift. Our spiritual growth in “increasing measure” is based entirely on “divine power” and “great and precious promises” given to us by God.

“For this reason,” Peter says in **verse 5**, “make every effort” to add all these wonderful qualities, the obvious meaning being that since we’ve been given these incredible gifts, precious promises and divine power to create these qualities in us, then go for all of them - as Peter himself writes - “grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord (verse 2).” That’s why Peter could say “be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure (verse 10),” because the reason God called and elected us was to fill us with these qualities in abundance, so go on, eagerly grab onto everything he called and elected us for, be sure to experience the whole lot, in total faith that they’re all ours, as a gift and promise. In contrast, “if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been

cleansed from his past sins (**verse 9**)." What on earth was the point of Christ calling us, cleansing us and electing us if we're not going to take full advantage of all that's he's offering us by gift and promise? They're ours "in abundance," that taken advantage of will prevent us ever falling back into our past sins, and, take note, "you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (**verse 11**)." A rich welcome. For eagerly grabbing onto God's gift of "everything we need for life and godliness," God richly welcomes us into his kingdom.

There is nothing negative in the tone of these verses, as though our eternity or our spiritual growth are dependent on what we do. The tone is positive, "reminding" us, **verse 12**, of truths we already know, of the precious faith and promises we've been given, and encouraging us to take advantage of them. There is no mention of spiritual growth only being possible by spiritual disciplines, or lack of spiritual growth due to not practicing the disciplines. The only negative bit is about being "nearsighted" and "blind" by forgetting what God called and cleansed us for - that "He redeemed us ...so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (**Galatians 3:14**)," and all that the Spirit makes possible.

So, when Peter goes on to say in **2 Peter 3:14**, "make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him," he's already explained what he means by "make every effort" - it's taking full advantage of what the promised Spirit has made possible - including becoming "spotless, blameless and at peace with him," because they're part of the "precious promises," too. And when Peter says a few verses later in **3:18**, "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ," he's already explained what he means in **2:2**, that there's an abundance of grace and peace awaiting us through what God had given us in Jesus Christ (**1:1**), so open our eyes to what he's called and elected us for and take full advantage of it. And how does one take advantage of all that we've been given? By spiritual disciplines? No, by faith, and even that's a gift, too (**1:1**).

Spiritual growth and spiritual formation are totally the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is working the miracle in us in "increasing measure," so that we not only grow in our understanding of God's promises, but also in our experience of the divine nature and in our eagerness to experience all that God has made possible (adding goodness to faith, etc.), so that one day God can richly welcome us into his kingdom for having grabbed onto everything he had to offer.

How foolish (**Galatians 3:1**) and nearsighted (**2 Peter 1:9**) it would be, then, when "everything we need for life and godliness" is supplied by divine power (**2 Peter 1:3**), to try to "attain our goal by human effort (**Galatians 3:3**)." God's entire plan for us, from beginning to end, is the work of the Spirit. "He redeemed us...so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (**Galatians 3:14**)." To insist, then, that there is some part we must play to help make things happen, like doing spiritual disciplines, cancels out the whole idea of God doing it all for

us. Works cancel out faith, just as faith cancels out works. You can't operate by faith and works together, as Paul says in **Romans 4:14**: "For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless." If we can accomplish life and godliness by law or human effort, then it does away with faith in the Spirit.

And doesn't the whole point of a gift lose its value and its worth to the receiver if he's expected to work for it?! A gift is a gift, you don't have to work for it. If work is involved, then it's for wages and it's no longer a gift: "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation," **Romans 4:4**. If there's work involved, then what a person receives for working isn't a gift, it's what he's owed. "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness (verse 5)." With righteousness, however, there's no work involved, because it's all "credited" to us on faith. It's not like working for wages, where we're owed for work done, it's all a gift. If work is required, then it's not a gift anymore, is it?

What we receive from God is either a gift or something we work for, it can't be both. If righteousness is a gift, then it doesn't need works. If it requires works, then it isn't a gift, or as Paul writes, "if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace," **Romans 11:6**. Grace is no longer grace if it involves works. It's either grace or works, faith or human effort, a gift or wages we're owed. It's either one or the other, it can't be both together. A promise is a promise; a gift is a gift; they don't involve works of any kind from us.

There's no such thing, then, as a "a means to receiving God's grace" that we must perform. There is a means to grace but it doesn't involve anything we do, as Paul makes clear in **Romans 5:1-2**: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." Our means to grace is faith, not spiritual disciplines.

Paul uses Abraham as an example, because Abraham didn't do anything to receive God's grace. "Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness," **Romans 4:9**. Not works, just faith. Paul backs that up with a key question in **verse 10**: "Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before?" That's a good question, because if Abraham had to be circumcised before God credited righteousness to him, then, yes, there is something Abraham had to do to "place himself before God" to receive God's grace. But if righteousness was credited to Abraham before he was circumcised, then there's nothing he had to do to receive God's grace. Or put in terms of spiritual formation, did Abraham have to go through the discipline of circumcision to place himself correctly before God to receive grace, or did he receive God's grace in full without any disciplines whatsoever? Which is it? Was righteousness credited to Abraham before or after he was circumcised? Paul's answer? "It was not after, but before!" Abraham was credited with righteousness before he was

circumcised. He didn't need to be circumcised, then, as a means of receiving grace. Abraham received God's grace in full without anything he had to do first. "Therefore the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring (Romans 4:16)."

"So that it may be by grace." When it comes to righteousness, whether it be life and godliness or spiritual formation, it's all done by grace, not works. David understood it this way, too: "David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works (verse 6)." There is no work that we must do to have righteousness credited to us, or a discipline we must perform as a means of placing ourselves before God to receive his grace for our spiritual formation. It is all done for us by God "so that it may be by grace."

It was certainly that way in Abraham's life. "It was not through law (or any other work, discipline or circumcision) that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith (verse 13)." If, instead, it had been through law, then "faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath (verses 14-15)." Depending on the law for one's righteousness, or disciplines for one's spiritual formation, carries with it guilt and fear of penalties if one doesn't measure up. What if, for example, I only manage to do three disciplines well each day but not very well in all the others? Does that mean I haven't placed myself before God properly enough and therefore the Spirit won't transform me as much? And since I've let down on the means of receiving grace, does that mean I receive less grace, and incur God's anger rather than favour? The pressure to be as near perfect as possible is enormous because "no spiritual disciplines, no spiritual formation" - or, as Richard Foster also writes - "All the disciplines should be thoughtfully and resolutely approached for the purpose of forming the life in Christ likeness, or they will have little or no effort in promoting this life." We'd better do all our disciplines well or our efforts won't produce the desired results. But that's like living back in the Old Testament again, where obedience to the entire law was imperative if one hoped to avoid falling out of God's favour. Back then it was the law that had better be obeyed perfectly, but now it's doing all one's spiritual disciplines.

On the other hand, what if I do all my spiritual disciplines well? Does God give me more credit or more grace than someone who doesn't? Does the Spirit transform me more? Well, if spiritual formation is, in fact, tied directly to doing our disciplines the answer would have to be "yes," and we could be very proud of ourselves at the end of each day for having done them. But Paul answers that with, "If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about" - and so would I if I was knocking off my disciplines every day with diligence and precision - "but not before God (Romans 4:2)." Oh, so I could be doing all my disciplines perfectly but God isn't impressed. But we know why, don't we? It's because God didn't credit Abraham with righteousness based on

his works, it was on his faith: “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (Romans 4:3).”

It’s interesting to note what Abraham did boast about, though. It’s in **verse 20**. “Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, (21) being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. (22) This is why ‘it was credited to him as righteousness.’”

Abraham gave all the glory to God, because he knew it was purely by God’s power that the promise to both him and his offspring would be fulfilled. And he didn’t waver in his faith because it was God who was strengthening him (20). It was in God’s works that he boasted, therefore, not his own. It’s interesting to note, then, that “The words ‘it was credited to him’ were - written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness (23-24).” As Abraham’s offspring (16) we too are credited with righteousness for our faith in God - in our case for believing “in him who raised Jesus from the dead...raised to life for our justification (24-25).”

It’s because we believe it’s all God’s doing through the risen Christ that we are justified that God credits us with righteousness. Just like Abraham, we are credited with righteousness for giving all the glory to God, and not in anything we do.