

## “Jesus and Spiritual Toughness”

### James 3:1-12 and Mark 8:27-38

([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=james+3:1-12](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=james+3:1-12))

([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+8:27-38](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+8:27-38))

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### Sometimes we are on the right road but in the wrong lane.

Jamie and I lived for about one year in the United Kingdom just after I finished Duke Divinity School. We enjoyed most of the experience, especially the challenge of driving on the other side of the road. We drove through the “roundabouts,” the crowded city streets, and the narrow country lanes without making one mistake. After we returned to the United States, we lived with our parents until we were able to find a permanent job. One day leaving my parents home in suburban Charleston, South Carolina, Jamie forcefully told me that I was driving on the wrong side of the road. I was arguing with her that I was not until I looked up and saw a rather large automobile coming in my direction in my lane of traffic. I realized that even though I was positively, absolutely sure I was right, that I was driving on the wrong side of the road. Even twenty five years later, I still remember my embarrassment. I thought I was on the right road in the right lane, but I was not. I was on the right road, but I was in the wrong lane.

We find the Apostle Peter in just such a crazy situation in Mark’s gospel. He had just experienced a profound spiritual moment on the mountain of transfiguration. His decision to become a disciple is clearly affirmed by this experience with God and with the prophets of Israel. Peter had convinced his father that it would be really good for the family if he and Andrew became disciples of Jesus. Peter was looking ahead and the greatest path of success seemed to be this path with Jesus. Peter worked his way into the inner circle. Crowds were applauding Jesus at every stop. People were being healed and even raised from the dead. The demons from hell were being cast out. Peter was riding an incredible spiritual high. He can imagine a wonderful future for himself and his family. Perhaps he will be the Tetrarch of Galilee. He might even be the Vice President of the New Israel after Jesus and his armies throw out the Romans. Peter was excited. He was traveling the right road, but unknown to him, Peter was in the wrong lane.

Peter risked everything by speaking aloud his dream when Jesus asks who the disciples think that He is. Peter speaks the unspeakable. Peter risks everything and names Jesus as God’s anointed king, Israel’s deliverer, The Messiah. Jesus affirms Peter’s courage and his insight. Then, everything turns upside down.

Peter expected Jesus to now begin to lay out His plans for conquering the land, driving the Romans into the sea, and establishing God’s New Kingdom. Jesus says for them all to keep quiet. Peter thinks that there will be more than Andy Warhol’s fifteen minutes of fame for all the disciples, especially the inner circle. But, Jesus begins to speak of suffering and death.

Peter is astounded. Peter begins to object in the strongest terms possible. “Absolutely not true!!” Peter screams. “Jesus stop this nonsense. You are messing up my carefully laid plans. I know who you are, stop being someone else.”

Jesus dresses Peter down. No private was ever dressed down by the General of the troops in a more forceful fashion. Peter is told to be quiet! Hold his tongue! Get out of the way! And, worst of all, stop working on the side of the Evil One. In a straight forward way, Jesus questions Peter’s loyalty. We, who know the entire story, including the night at Caiaphas’ court yard that is soon coming, can understand that Jesus knew something about Peter that Peter did not know about himself.

Peter was traveling on the right road, but he was in the wrong lane. He was headed for an accident. Peter was traveling on the spiritual journey, but Peter has not allowed Jesus to transform his soul, renew his heart, nor deepen his mind. Peter was trapped within the cultural confines of his own narrow world. He was unwilling to hear Jesus’ challenge to him to step out into God’s larger world. Peter may be closed, but Jesus goes ahead and plants within his head the seed of God’s radical plan.

Jesus’ words are a challenge to us all. He says that the true spiritual path to knowing and loving the living God of the universe is this: **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me.” (Mark 8:34)** ([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+8:34](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+8:34)) These words are for Peter,

the disciples who are gathered around, and for all people who seek God since then. There is a spiritual toughness in these words that we often deny. Jesus is sharing a vision of a new way of living in the world. Summarized in these phrases is a tough and courageous lifestyle that will lead a person through the suffering and pain of this world with a peace and tranquillity that is unimaginable to those who do not know Jesus Christ. Let us see if we can appreciate and understand Jesus' words any better than Peter did.

**Jesus said: "If anyone will come after me, he must deny himself..."**

We live in an age of self centered individualism. We are so rooted and grounded in this lifestyle that we have a difficult time understanding anything else. Peter had his cultural understanding of who the Messiah would be and that kept him from truly seeing Jesus. We have cultural presuppositions about our lives as individuals that keep us from hearing Jesus' invitation. When we hear *deny yourself*, we think of pain and punishment. We automatically think that we do not want to be a doormat for Jesus or a wimp for God. Our defensive reactions keep us from hearing what God wants us to know.

Jesus is saying give up completely and totally your love of, affection for, appreciation of, Frank Sinatra's famous song, "I did it my way."

- To deny yourself is to let go of your assumption that you are the center of the universe.
- To deny yourself is to let go of your need to have everything relate to you, your feelings, your needs, and your desires.
- To deny yourself is to let go of self preoccupation, self aggrandizement, self pity, and self concern.
- To deny yourself is to lift your eyes from off your self and see the world through God's eyes.

When you walk into any Russian Orthodox Church and look up, you will see an eye painted upon the very highest point of the ceiling. That is a representation of God's eye. The message is that God is watching you. The message is also that there is a view from outside yourself that includes parts of a world that does not relate to you at all. God's view is beyond you.

When Job is sitting on the garbage heap of his despair and grief yelling out to God in anger and frustration, his self absorbed cry is for God to show up and explain Godself. God eventually does show up. But, God does not explain. God challenges Job. In essence God says; "See the world through my eyes, Job. See the big picture. See beyond yourself, Job." The message is not very helpful to those of us who want to control our own destiny, but it is God's way of reminding us that we are limited, finite, human beings no matter what we think of ourselves.

To deny yourself is to step out of this self absorbed, individualized culture and throw away some here to fore cherished assumptions. You will throw away the assumption:

- I can handle life by myself, I don't need any help.
- I am the captain of my soul and the leader of my universe.
- I create my own truth out of my experience.
- I will live life my way.
- Nobody can tell me what to do, where to go, or how to be.

To deny yourself means that your definition of what is worthy and good must also change. When someone in this culture asks, "What's he or she worth?" They don't mean how valuable he is to the church or community. They don't mean how moral a life is he leading? They don't mean how good a parent is he? They merely mean how much money he has. When those who follow Jesus ask what someone is worth they mean much more than money, personal success symbols, and individual career tracks. Worthiness in God's eyes is determined:

- Not by what you keep, but by how much you give away;
- Not by what you collect, but by how you share with others;
- Not by what you do to advance yourself, but by how you support others.

To follow Jesus by denying yourself is to choose to daily walk the road that is counter to the values and assumptions that we have grown up believing. Jesus is telling you that within this culture you are living a lie. It doesn't matter that you are comfortable within the familiar assumptions of this culture. The true path to

victory, fulfillment, meaning, love, and joy is the path of letting go and letting Jesus Christ lead you each day. The spiritually tough people learn how to deny themselves and follow Jesus!

**“To follow Jesus you must take up your cross...”**

To let Jesus lead means that we must also take up our crosses. Unfortunately our individualized culture warps our understanding of this phrase as well. We hear pick up your cross in terms of our fate, our predestined suffering. We hear this as something we have to endure by ourselves. Often our attitude is either resignation or blame. We do not think we have to suffer.

The fact that Jesus was crucified for us does not mean that we have been saved from crucifixion. The reality that Jesus bore the sins of the world upon His shoulders does not mean that we do not need to repent. The truth that Jesus overcame the world does not mean that we cannot succumb to it. Jesus challenges us to responsible action in the real world.

**Choose between cultural fantasy and real world action!**

A part of the fantasy of life in America today is the assumption that we will all live happily ever after. No one tells you that pain increases along with every birthday. We deny as best we can the reality of disease and death. We blame God when accidents occur, illness attacks, and death comes too soon because we live in a cultural assumption that we should be able to live pain free for at least ninety years.

Jesus challenges this set of cultural assumptions. The path of God's grace going up God's mountain is steep and at times difficult. We will fail. We will falter. We will at sometimes fall down. The central issue is not happiness. Our focus is not success. We are called to faithful following of Jesus up the life's mountain trails.

Let me share a true life story from one of the world's great theologians. I was privileged to hear Jurgen Moltmann speak at my graduation from Duke in 1973. I did not know at that point that he had been a prisoner of war in a Scottish camp from 1944 until 1948. He was captured in one of the European battles of WWII. He was a young German soldier who knew nothing of the Third Reich except what his superiors told him. In 1945 when the truth of the holocaust became known in the camp, Moltmann shared that his world fell apart. He was consumed with guilt, remorse, and failure. He writes:

*For me the turn from humiliation to new hope came about through two things --- first through the Bible, and then through the encounter with other people.*

*In the Scottish labor camp, together with some other astonished prisoners, I was for the first time given a Bible by a well-meaning army chaplain. Some of us would rather have had a few cigarettes. I read it without much comprehension, until I stumbled on the psalms of lament. Psalm 39 held me spellbound: “I was dumb with silence, I held my peace and my sorrow was stirred” (but Luther's German is much stronger---“I have to eat up my suffering within myself”). “My lifetime is as nothing in Thy sight...Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; hold not Thou Thy peace at my tears, for I am a stranger with Thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were...” They were the words of my own heart and they called my soul to God. Then I came to the story of the passion, and when I read Jesus' death cry, “My God, why have you forsaken me?,” I knew with certainty: this is someone who understands you. I began to understand the assailed Christ because I felt that he understood me: this was the divine brother in distress, who takes the prisoners with him on his way to resurrection. I began to summon up the courage to live again, seized by a great hope. I was even calm when other men were “repatriated” and I was not. This early fellowship with Jesus, the brother in suffering and the redeemer from guilt, has never left me since. I never “decided for Christ” as is often demanded of us, but I am sure that then and there, in the dark pit of my soul, he found me.*

Moltmann later found the reality of grace in God's great family. In the summer of 1947, he was taken to a world ecumenical Christian Conference for young adults that was being hosted by Great Britain. Moltmann describes one scene from that conference that profoundly touched him.

*Then a group of Dutch students came and asked to speak to us officially. Again I was frightened for I had fought in Holland, in the battle for the Arnheim Bridge. The Dutch students told us that Christ was the bridge on which they could cross to us, and that without Christ they would not be talking to us at all. They told of the Gestapo terror, the loss of their Jewish friends and the destruction of their homes. We too could step onto this bridge that Christ had build from them to us, and could confess the guilt of our people and ask for*

*reconciliation. At the end we all embraced for me that was an hour of liberation. I was able to breathe again, felt like a human being once more, and returned cheerfully to the camp behind the barbed wire.*

To take up my cross is to assume that I will be sharing with the world the pain of this planet. We live in a fallen world where wars kill innocent people, where disease maims and kills innocent children, where injustice is rampant, and where not very much is fair.

My own cross has to do with the brokenness of Christ's church. Two weeks ago, I was reminded of my challenge and my cross by two persons who responded to my sermon about the Grace filled mountain top.. One person said that unfortunately some of the most unloving people she knew were Christians. Another person wondered if the phrase loving Christian wasn't an oxymoron. I ache when I consider the kernels of truth reflected in these two comments. I am determined to live my life in such a way that Christ can move through me and heal just a little of the damage that the Christian church has inflicted upon people. We do live in a tough world that demands of Christians a certain spiritual toughness that can only come from Christ Jesus who has carried his cross on this path before us.

We can blame God. We can become cynical. We can choose to be defensive and negative. We can also choose to pick up the cross that is ours and follow Jesus Christ.

Christ knows the road. Christ knows the burden. Christ is willing to walk with us and help us in carrying the load. The yoke is easy and the burden is light when we walk in partnership with Christ.

Jesus speaks to each of us on a daily basis. He challenges us to walk to a different drummer. He invites us to live by a different song. We can replace "I'll do it my way" with "Where ever He leads, I'll Go." The important decision you make each day is to let Jesus lead you in your everyday living while participating in God's healing and reconciling work.

When you hear Jesus say to you "*deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.*" You hear an invitation to move from joy to joy, from peace to peace, and from love to love. Only after you pick up your cross will you know the true joy, peace, hope, and love that God has for you. Only after you pick up your cross will you be able to make a difference in this world!