



Back in July I spent some time watching the Tour de France on TV. If you're not familiar with the Tour it's the granddaddy of all cycling races. It's a grueling event spanning three weeks and 2100 miles. Two hundred professional cyclists ride up brutal mountain passes and then fly down those mountains at speeds in excess of 50 miles per hour. As a cyclist, I'm in awe of these athletes.

Toward the end of the first week a group of cyclists was flying down a steep and treacherous mountain pass and they came upon a sharp corner. Two of the cyclists took the turn too wide and wound up off the road doing about 45 miles per hour. One of the cyclist crashed and was done riding for the day. But the other cyclist somehow got his bike back on the road and without missing a beat pedaled his way back into the pack. It was amazing!

I got to thinking about that moment and realized that life's like that. We all wind up off the road at some point in time. We all blow it. We all make mistakes. We all fail. And for some people failure is fatal. It's the end. They stay down and they don't get up. They allow failure to define them. They stop pursuing their dreams. They stop taking risks. They never really get back on the road again. But for others they find a way to get back on the road and stay in the race of life. How do they do it? How do we recover from failure and get back on the road? That's exactly what James is going to address as we continue our journey through this remarkably practical book of the bible. So, open your bible to James 4:7-10 and let's read it together (NLT).

If you scratch beneath the surface of James' letter you discover that the community to whom James was writing had strayed off the road of following Jesus. They were ignoring the poor. They had fallen prey to selfish ambition. They blamed God for their problems. They fought with one

another. They had become careless with their words and their faith was more talk than action. James convicted the community of all of these things, and in the passage we just read he provides them – and us – with a process for getting back on the road. Let me share it with you.

The first step to getting back on the road is to admit that you're off it. Sometimes we're like little kids who deny eating cookies before dinner despite the fact that there are crumbs on our lips! We refuse to admit we've blown it. We justify ourselves. We deny we've got an issue. But we can't get back on the road until we humbly admit that we've gotten off it. And that's why James begins this section with these words, "Humble yourselves before the Lord." It takes humility to admit that you've blown it, and that humility isn't a sign of weakness; it's a sign of strength. And it starts our healing. I love the words and the wisdom of Psalm 32, "When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long....Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, 'I will confess my rebellion to the LORD.' And you forgave me!"

We all wind up off the road. We all blow it. But those who get back on the road begin by admitting that they're off it. Admit it to yourself. Admit it to God. And if you really want to be courageous, admit it to someone who loves you. That's powerful, and healing, stuff.

The second step to getting back on the road is to resist the devil. James says, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." What exactly does it mean to resist the devil? Does it mean to fight with a little red man with horns, a tail and pitchfork? Probably not! When I think about resisting the devil in the context of recovering from failure I think about that little voice in my head that says, "You've blow it. You're a failure. You're worthless. You'll never amount to anything. Why bother trying?" Are you familiar with that little voice? Psychologists sometimes call it "the inner critic" and we all have one. And if we listen to that voice and accept it as the truth, we'll never muster the energy to get back on the road. We'll consider ourselves defeated. We'll consider ourselves unforgiven and unloved. We'll just lie down and give up.

But here's the deal – that little voice isn't telling us the truth. It's spouting lies. Which is why the way to resist that voice, to resist the devil, is to tell yourself the truth – the truth that comes from scripture. Truths like these:

- I have loved you with an everlasting love. – Jeremiah 31:3
- As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our sins from us. – Psalm 103:12
- Behold, I am making all things new. – Revelation 21:5

That's the truth. And when we ground our lives in those truths we're living into James' command, "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you." The truth of God's word draws our hearts close to God's heart and reminds us that God is with us and for us. The truth of God's word will set you free, free from guilt and shame. Those are truths that will resist the devil. Those are truths that will get you back on the road again.

The third step to getting back on the road is to wash your hands and purify your hearts. This is the challenging step of self-reflection. This is where you ask yourself, "What actions and attitudes led me to ride off the road in the first place? Maybe I need to change the people I'm hanging out with. Maybe I need to change the things I'm filling my mind with. Maybe I need to change something in my environment to ensure that I don't ride off the road again. This step is akin to what St. Paul talks about in Romans 12, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Let me give you an example of what this whole process looks like. I know a guy who recently fell off the road. He drank too much, got behind the wheel of his car and was arrested for drunk driving. While he sat in jail he did the first step in this process of getting back on the road: he admitted to himself and then to his spouse that he had a drinking problem. It was the first time he admitted that. And then in the next few days he had to resist the devil. That voice inside his head tried to convince him that he was a loser and that he could never change. And when that didn't work the voice tried another tactic, telling him that he really didn't have a drinking problem. He could have a drink. Just one, and he'd be fine. But he took the second step of getting back on the road: he stood on the truth – that God loved him and forgave him, that he was never alone and that God would help him. And then he took the third step: he did some serious reflection on the actions and attitudes that drove him off the road in the first place. And through that reflection he removed all the alcohol from his home, cut ties with his drinking buddies and join an AA group. It hasn't been easy, but today that man is back on the road.

Perhaps the question you need to wrestle with today isn't, "Are you on the road or are you off the road?" Perhaps a better question is, "In what area of life are you off the road?" What area of your life is off the pathway of following Jesus? Maybe for you an important first step would be to discover what the pathway of following Jesus actually looks like. You can't know whether you're on or off the road if you don't know what the road is! If that's true for you then perhaps you want to read one of the Gospels and pay really close attention to what Jesus says and does and ask yourself, "Do my life look like I'm following Jesus? Or maybe you're well aware of that area of your life that's off the road. If that's the case then I want to encourage you to start the journey of getting back onto the road by putting James' wisdom into practice. The Daily Readings this week will guide you in that process. Immerse yourself in those readings every day this week.

And no matter where you are today, I want you to know that God is there with you. On the road, off the road. It doesn't matter. God is there with you providing all you need to get onto the road that leads to joy and wholeness and life.