You may have squared the left side and not the right side, to get the incorrect equation $3a + 1 = a - 3$. That equation would have $a = -2$ as a solution. Make sure that you always perform the same operation on both sides of an equation. In this case you will get $3a + 1 = a^2 - 6a + 9$. Solve this equation and check the solution back in the original equation. The correct answer is $a = 8$.