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TOSS YOUR CAP OVER THE WALL

Mark 3:20-35

Slide #1

Even though this is baseball season, I want to begin with a basketball story about Michael Jordan, perhaps the greatest professional basketball player of all time.

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One night Michael scored sixty-nine points in a single game.

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In that same game, rookie Stacey King made his inauspicious debut. He shot one free throw and made it. After the final buzzer, a reporter asked King for his thoughts on the game. Stacey King, with tongue planted firmly in his cheek, replied: “I’ll always remember this as the night that Michael Jordan and I combined for 70 points.” Well, I guess that is one way to look at it.

Michael Jordan was a great basketball player. And yet John Eliot, in his book titled *Overachievement*, claims that Michael Jordan was not really a very gifted basketball player. For example, Jordan ranked ninth in the NBA for field goals made and eighteenth in total points. He never ranked first in any major NBA statistic. Even in his prime, Jordan was not the fastest or most accurate shooter; nor was he a great rebounder or brilliant at defense. (1)

Yet Jordan is considered the greatest player of his era, and maybe the best ever. How did a poor defender and average shooter get to be a five time NBA MVP--not to mention earn the reputation as the best hoops player on the planet? Passion? Confidence? Determination? All of these were involved, of course. Michael Jordan, who famously was cut from his middle school team, simply set out to be the best he could be and as we say, the rest is history.

There is a part of almost everyone that is thrilled when someone attempts to reach lofty goals. The pioneer, the successful entrepreneur, the victorious athlete--all speak to us about the ability of the human spirit to achieve monumental accomplishments when properly motivated.

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President John F. Kennedy’s hero was his grandfather, and he loved to hear stories about

his grandfather's boyhood and home in Ireland. One of these stories concerned how Grandfather Fitzgerald used to walk home from school each day with a group of friends.

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Sometimes these boys would challenge each other to climb over the stone walls along the lanes of the countryside. However, there were times when young Fitzgerald and the other boys were sometimes hesitant to dare the hazardous climbs. So they devised a way to motivate themselves to take the risk involved,

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They would toss their caps over the wall. You see, they knew that they dare not go home without their caps, so then they had to climb over the walls to get them.

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Now the boys had to climb the wall, just to get their caps back!

Slide #4

1. **There are times when all of us long to toss our caps over the wall.** There are times when we hunger in our own way for the heroic--whether we want to change jobs, start our own business, go back to school, or whatever. There come those times in life when we feel the need to make a change.

I know of one young man in particular who decided to make such a change. He was thirty years old at the time, and he owned a successful carpentry business which had been left to him by his father. He was secure, he was liked and respected by his friends and neighbors, and he was meeting his responsibilities. But he knew that this was not where he belonged. He felt called to a ministry--a ministry of teaching and preaching. And so, he threw his cap over the wall.

At first he met with spectacular success, and his reputation spread with amazing speed. But as his popularity increased, so did the number of his critics, especially in his home town. Some of his closest friends tried to dissuade him from his insanity, and his family was also concerned for him. But he persevered in his new calling for three years, only to die an untimely death. Do you know who I am referring to?

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Jesus!

As he hung on a tree between two thieves--dying a cruel and unjust death, feeling forsaken by both God and man--no one would have judged his life to be a success. But it was. It was the most successful life ever lived. I think Jesus tossed his cap over the wall, and because He did, you and I are loved and forgiven.

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Early in the twentieth century the world thrilled as Colonel Charles Lindbergh flew his little spruce wood plane solo across the Atlantic.

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As he was leaving the last stretches of land in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, he kept looking down on the forests and lakes and valleys and thinking that if an emergency arose he would land in that little clearing beside the river, or he would clear that little clump of trees and land in that lake. But soon there were no more clearings, no more clumps of trees--only ocean. He had thrown his cap was over the wall.

Doesn't it make your blood run faster, to know that there are people who have charted a heroic course for their lives and seen it through? There are times in everyone's life when they need to toss their cap over the wall.

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2. Of course, no one has ever accomplished anything of note without critics.

When you toss your cap over a wall, you learn very quickly who your true friends are.

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Winston Churchill, truly a man of heroic stature,

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But he was also one of the most criticized politicians who ever lived. That's why of the

thousands of pictures we have of Churchill,

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this is the best he could do as a smile. But he knew how to handle his detractors.

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Perhaps the most famous of Churchill's exchanges was one he had at a state dinner with Nancy Astor, whose own reputation for acid wit and instant criticism was considerable.

During this dinner Lady Astor was compelled to listen to Churchill expound his views on a great number of subjects, all of them at variance with her own strongly held views. Finally, no longer able to hold her tongue, she spat, "Winston, if you were my husband, I would flavor your coffee with poison." To which Churchill immediately replied, "Madam, if I were your husband, I would have drunk it." (2)

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No one accomplishes anything of note without critics.

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Jesus had his critics. In today's lesson from Mark's Gospel Jesus is still in the early part of his ministry. However, people are starting to take note of him. He has chosen his twelve disciples who will carry on the work after he is gone and the crowds are growing larger. Momentum is building toward a magnificent ministry.

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But almost immediately he runs into opposition. First of all, it was from his own family. Mark tells us that when Jesus' family heard about what was happening, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

Can you imagine that? Jesus' family wanted him to shut down his ministry and come home. Isn't this the way life is? Sometimes it is those closest to us who have the hardest time coming to grips with our dreams and aspirations.

I like the story about the first grade teacher who was taking her pupils on a field trip to

the local zoo. Each child was given a turn at guessing the names of the various animals. The camel, lion, giraffe, bear, and the elephant all were named correctly. Then it got to be a little boy's turn. The teacher pointed to a deer and asked him if he knew what it was.

He hesitated for a long time, looking unsure of himself. So the teacher tried to prompt him by telling him to think of what his mother called his father at home. The boy brightened up immediately: "So that's what a baboon looks like!"

I won't ask you if you have ever referred to your spouse as a baboon. But I can assure you that anyone who seeks to make a dramatic change in their life is going to encounter criticism and tension. Sometimes it will come from your own family.

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Critics may come from our own colleagues. In Jesus' case, it was the teachers of the law who had come down from Jerusalem. With a poisonous sneer they greeted his teachings, "He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."

Isn't that the way life is? Start to make waves and somebody will try to wrest the oars out of your hands by belittling your work. One author has called this the "Salk Theory."

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You remember Jonas Salk, that great doctor of medicine who pioneered polio research and discovered the Polio Vaccine.

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He was so sure of his vaccine; a picture was taken of Dr. Salk administering the vaccine to his own daughter.

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But he had a legion of critics he dealt with over the years. At one point, he made an interesting observation about the nature of criticism, which seems to hold true for any person who is successfully innovative.

"First," he said, "people will tell you that you are wrong. Then they will tell you that you are right, but what you're doing really isn't important. Finally, they will admit that you are

right and that what you are doing is very important; but after all, they knew it all the time.” (3)

There comes a time when we toss our caps over the wall in spite of everything the critics have to say. Nothing is ever accomplished by people who value comfort and safety and acceptance above all else. There comes a time for what is often called a leap of faith.

With the Funeral of Florence Stark, and reading her obituary, I discovered that she and her husband Maurice first child was a son, whom they named Norman. At three years old, the toddler had climbed up on the railing and banister of their porch and fell, hitting his head, causing a severe injury and raging infection which ultimately led to his untimely death. The year was 1937. In that same year, only six months later penicillin came on the market. One doctor predicted that if penicillin had been available for little Norman, he would have survived.

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3. Of course the greatest adventure that one can start out on--the most spectacular, and often the most courageous change that can be made in a life--is that of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Now it is unfortunate that, for the most part, that statement will fall on deaf ears.

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All too often we confuse discipleship with membership in the church. Or we confuse discipleship with respectability.

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But there is certainly no particular risk involved in being respectable or belonging to a church. But, to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, to move from a nominal belief to a radical conviction, and the critic rate goes up substantially.

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To move from mere acquaintance with God to a complete commitment of one's life, and you will find yourself with many detractors.

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Some may even think, "You are out of your mind." But not to worry, you would be in good company.

Slide #10

Do you know the name Noel Paul Stookey? You might remember Paul Stookey as the second member of the folk singing trio, "Peter, Paul and Mary."

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Some of you might remember Stookey by the beautiful Wedding Song he wrote:

He is now to be among you at the calling of your hearts
Rest assured this troubadour is acting on His part.
The union of your spirits, here, has caused Him to remain
For whenever two or more of you are gathered in His name
There is Love, there is Love. (4)

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At one point in his life, Stookey was going through a time of searching and crisis. He was disturbed by the hypocrisy in his life. And he turned to an old Greenwich Village friend named Bob Dylan for advice.

Two things that Dylan said stood out in Stookey's mind: One, go for a long walk in the country and read the Bible. Paul took the advice. He walked in the country, and it helped him sort out his priorities. And he read the Bible. Although his folk group had sung several spirituals and gospel tunes, Stookey had never opened a Bible before. But now he read through the entire New Testament and parts of the Old. He had a hard time with some of it: it was slow and often mysterious. But something real happened in Paul Stookey's life then, and today he is living as a disciple of Jesus Christ. (5) His cap is over the wall.

Isn't it time for some of us to toss our cap over the wall? A certain high jumper was referring to a world record he set in his sport. He said he **threw his heart** over the bar and the rest of him followed. Perhaps you and I need to throw our hearts over the altar, so that we may follow.

Jesus' ministry had his critics, of course. But he never let them detract him from his call. His life is a challenge to our lives. It is time for us to toss our cap over the wall as well.

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- 1 *The New Model for Exceptional Performance* (New York: Penguin Group, Inc., 2004), pp. 118-119.
 2. Leon A. Harris, *The Fine Art Of Political Wit* (E.P. Dutton.)
 3. Michael and Donna Nason, *Robert Schuller: His Story* (New York: Jove Books, 1983).
 4. Copyright 1971 by the Public Domain Foundation.
 5. Fred Hartley, *100% Beyond Mediocrity* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1983).