

Draw the Circle

1. Become a Circle Maker

March 4-5, 2017

Welcome to the first week of our spiritual growth campaign called “Draw the Circle.” You could say that this campaign is about prayer, but it’s really bigger than that - it’s about seeing God work in your life, and about growing in faith to see God work in new ways. We’ve based this series on Mark Batterson’s book titled, “The Circle Maker” and I’ve asked Na’a Tetteh to launch our series today by leading us in prayer.

The Legend of Honi is found in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus. It was decades before the birth of Christ, and Israel was in a terrible drought. Streams and wells were drying up. Animals were dying and entire villages were on the brink. There was no water to be found anywhere. The only solution was rain. The last of the Jewish prophets had died hundreds of years before. Miracles were a distant memory. No one had heard from God.

But there was one old scholar who lived outside the walls of Jerusalem, who dared to pray anyway. His name was Honi. And even if the people could no longer hear God, Honi believed God could hear them. Honi was famous being able to pray for rain, and this was the day that sealed that reputation. That day, Honi took his 6-foot staff in his hand, and placed the tip on the dusty ground in front of him.

Then he began to turn around, continuing to hold his staff out in front of him so that by the time he turned completely around, he had created a circle around himself. Honi stood inside the circle he had drawn. Then he dropped to his knees and raised his hands to heaven. With the authority of the prophet Elijah, who called down fire from heaven, Honi called down rain, *“Lord of the universe, I swear before Your great name that I will not move from this circle until You have shown mercy on Your children.”*

Everyone held their breath as they heard his words. It wasn’t just the volume of his voice; it was the authority of his tone. Not a hint of doubt. This prayer came from the depth of his soul. His prayer was determined but humble, expectant, but not demanding.

Then it happened. After this prayer went up to heaven, some rain drops started falling to the earth. The people gasped. For the first time in months, they looked upward with hope. But Honi wasn’t done. Still kneeling within the circle, Honi lifted his voice again, *“I haven’t prayed for this kind of rain, I prayed for the kind that will fill pits, cisterns and caverns!”* The sprinkle turned into a downpour. Witnesses said that each drop was the size of an egg. People had to scramble to

high ground as water began to pool around the area. Honi stayed in his circle and prayed boldly again, revising his request one more time, *“I haven’t prayed for this kind of rain, I pray for the rain of Your favor, blessing, and graciousness.”* Then, it began to rain calmly and peacefully. Each rain drop soaking into the ground and nourishing it, saving the community.

Although a historian recorded that story, we can’t tell for sure how much of it actually happened. But it has become part of the collection of teachings that Jewish scholars have passed down over the centuries. That’s because Honi’s story gives us a vivid picture of the power and promise of prayer. It reveals the impact that one person can have through the power of prayer. The story of Honi illustrates the biblical truth that **Bold prayers honor God, and God honors bold prayers**. Throughout the scriptures there are stories of people making bold asks in prayer. And yet, some are uncomfortable about making a bold ask.

I have to admit that I don’t really like to ask people for things. What’s the most audacious ask you’ve made of someone? One of mine would have to be the day twenty years ago that I walked in to Weirton Lumber and said, “We’re building a church with volunteers. Can I have several hundred thousand dollars worth of material on credit? I’ve got this letter promising a mortgage if we get an occupancy permit.” For some reason, they said “yes”! And they even donated the interest back to us when we were done!

Now, you have to understand, I hate asking people for things. I quit the Boy Scouts because we were supposed to go door to door to sell things, and I was too shy to do that. Audacious asks are not in my personality! But I did that one because I believed God wanted us to build that building.

We may not usually make a bold ask FOR God, but Jesus encourages us to make bold asks TO God; to pray bold prayers like Honi did. Ironically, after the miracle of the rain, the council of religious leaders wanted to kick Honi out of the temple community because they felt he dishonored God by being so bold in his prayer. But the miracle of the rain was irrefutable, and they couldn’t do anything to him. They didn’t realize that that bold prayers honor God because they show that we believe in his power and his greatness. When we make a bold ask for a miracle it means that we have confidence in God’s ability to answer it. And when He answers those bold asks, God gets glory, too.

During this spiritual growth campaign we’re going to invite you to make a bold ask to God, to draw a circle around a need or goal in your life, and see what God will do when we pray. Over this next 6 weeks we’re going to do more than learn about prayer, we’re challenging each of us to “draw a circle” around something we need God to do in our lives and to pray boldly.

To get the most from this experience takes doing three things:

- Worship together all 6 weeks of the series.
- Use the 40 day devotional book called “Draw the Circle,” reading a chapter per day (only a few pages long).
- Participate in a small group. We have about 70 of them to choose from, some are brand new and just starting now. You can sign up for one today at the booth in the lobby.

Who knows the ways God is going to impact our lives as we circle a need in prayer. In fact, our church’s ministry has already been shaped by drawing a circle in prayer. Our Bridgeville campus was able to move to a larger space on Boyce Road because some members there drew a circle around that new building and kept praying without giving up. Isn’t that cool? Bold prayers honor God, and God honors bold prayers! Not just for church buildings, but for the needs in your life.

In the New Testament there’s an account of Jesus teaching a guy to “draw a circle.” Not a literal circle, of course. What I mean is that he taught a guy to ask specifically and boldly.

Luke 18:35-43 ³⁵ *As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.* In those days, someone who couldn’t see couldn’t work, and if you couldn’t work, your options were to beg or to starve. So, this guy’s life consisted of sitting and begging from people he couldn’t see, day after day after day. No one wants to live that way.

³⁶ *When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening.* ³⁷ *They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.”* By this time, Jesus had become quite famous because of all the miracles he had performed. Even the blind man had heard of him. So when he heard Jesus was passing by, he jumped at the opportunity.

³⁸ *He called out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”* ³⁹ *Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”* The blind man called out to Jesus repeatedly and he didn’t care what other people thought. This was his chance and he was going for it.

⁴⁰ *Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him,* ⁴¹ *“What do you want me to do for you?”* Now why would Jesus ask that question? Isn’t it obvious what a blind man wants? Not necessarily. Many people choose to live with their problems instead of seeking God to healing. Change is hard. So Jesus asked him to be specific about what he wanted. Jesus asked him to name exactly what he wanted Jesus to do. Jesus asked him to “Draw the Circle.” *“Lord, I want to see,” he replied.* Now that’s a bold request. He could have been more “reasonable” like, “Lord, please give me

a donation.” Or “Lord, please bless my family.” He already asked a general, “Lord, have mercy on me,” but he went big. He asked, “Lord, I want to see!” It takes major power to make a blind person see. That takes a miracle!

⁴² Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.” ⁴³ Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God. When the beggar called out, “Have mercy on me!” he didn’t receive his sight. But when he made a bold ask, that’s when the miracle happened.

Why can it be hard for us to ask something bold from God? We might think it is arrogant or inappropriate to ask God for something big. We figure that God knows our needs already, so why should we ask? But remember, Jesus asked the blind man, “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus prompted him to ask.

And he prompts us to ask too! Jesus teaches that in many places, like in **Luke 11:9** *“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you* and in **John 16:24** *Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.* Ask! Draw the Circle and ask!

Maybe we feel like we shouldn’t ask for something for ourselves but only for other people. But Jesus asked the blind man, “What do you want me to do for you?” Maybe deep down, we are afraid that if we ask, nothing will happen. Then what? Well, if we don’t ask, nothing will happen! **James 4:2** says, *You do not have because you do not ask God.*

Don’t close yourself off from a deeper experience with God. Ask! Don’t rob yourself of blessings or God of glory! Draw the Circle! When we ask, God will answer. Sometimes He will answer “Yes,” sometimes he’ll answer “No,” and sometimes he’ll answer “Not yet.”

If the Lord were to ask you today, “What do you want me to do for you?” what would you say? How would you answer? What might happen if you circle that in prayer over these next 6 weeks? If you aren’t totally sure what to pray for, **here is how to choose your prayer circle:**

Listen to God. Start by asking God what he wants to do, because the purpose of prayer is not to get what you want. The goal of prayer is to discern what God wants, what God wills. Often God will put the desire in you for what He wants, and sometimes a need in our lives presses us to ask. Either way, start by asking God what he wants you to pray for. Then, pay attention to ideas that come to mind, to images or words that go through your mind, or desires that well up in you. That could be God communicating the target for you. We are told to pray “In Jesus’ name.” That means to pray a prayer that Jesus would pray. Don’t think

Jesus only cares about explicitly spiritual things like people coming to Christ or what happens in a church building. Yes, he cares about those things, but He also cares about your finances, art, education, and health care.

Listen to your life. Ask, “What is my biggest problem or concern?” Sometimes it is obvious what you need to pray for when you’re in pain. It was obvious for the blind man; he wanted to see. Being blind impacted him every day and he wanted a different life. What is the one issue that you would change if you could? What keeps you awake at night? Circle it. Instead of worrying, pray!

Or ask, “What is my biggest opportunity or dream?” Sometimes you won’t be praying because of pain in your life, but because of a dream for your life. What would you like to do if you knew you couldn’t fail? Could that be what God is calling you to circle in prayer?

Some of us know right now what we need to circle in prayer. It is an obvious need or a dream that already drives you. Others of us need to take some time to process this. That’s fine. Ask God about it. Talk about it with your small group. If you are not convinced about whether prayer makes a difference, I understand. We’re glad you are here today. I encourage you to draw a circle, too, and consider it an experiment. See what might happen if you follow through.

We gave you a piece of chalk today so you could draw a circle. There are two uses for this chalk.

First, this chalk is a reminder for you to draw a circle and to pray for what you circle. You can put this chalk somewhere you will see it, at the breakfast table, your desk at work, or by your TV remote. Let it remind you to pray. Now, many of us have good intentions about praying, but then days go by and we realize we haven’t really prayed.

To bridge the gap between good intentions and reality, make a prayer appointment with God. Choose a time and a place to meet with God daily. The good news is that God is always available, so no matter what time or place you pick, he will be there! There are a couple of blanks on your outline to write down where and when you’d like to meet with God this week. I’ll give you a moment to fill them in right now. The time doesn’t have to be real long, but we will be more likely to pray if we set that appointment. When will it be for you? Write that in. Now how about the place? It could be at your desk or work site. It could be in a chair in your house, or even in your car before you go into work. Last week I actually found a closet and prayed in there! What will work for you?

My prayer appointment with God: TIME: _____ PLACE: _____

A second thing about drawing the circle is this: we invite you to write your prayer focus on the paper that is in the back of the worship area and circle it. It can become a public record of what God is doing in our lives together over these

weeks. You may be ready today after the service. If so, go ahead and write it on the wall. If you need some time to think more about your prayer target, that's totally fine. Think about it this week and you can write it up there next week.

Some of us will find our prayer answered after the 6 weeks. You can make a check mark on it when God answers! For others, it will take longer. Maybe even a year! That's OK. We will grow as we journey in prayer with God. Let's pray for guidance selecting the prayer to circle.