

## **Like a Good Neighbor (Serving - Chapter 9)**

n/a

### **Ready:**

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.

Mark 12:30-31

### **Set**

As the son of an Air Force chaplain, Danny Wuerffel had lots of neighbors growing up. He had neighbors in South Carolina, Nebraska, Colorado and even Spain. Eventually Wuerffel's family settled in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, where he developed into one of the state's outstanding quarterbacks. And while most kids in his shoes might have fallen prey to becoming typical military brats, Wuerffel had a much different understanding of his circumstances.

"The Scriptures say to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself," Wuerffel says. "But we are unfortunately caught up with focusing most of our passions not on loving our neighbor but loving and caring and serving ourselves."

Wuerffel's well-balanced attitude—grounded by his strong Christian upbringing—was not only fortified by the example set by his father's military service but was equally modeled by his mother, Lola, a stay-at-home mom with a big heart.

"My mother was probably the first person to really model serving to me," Wuerffel says. "She was a phenomenal mother, caring for all the needs of her children; and as I grew up, I learned she was a very talented musician growing up and had different opportunities to pursue that. It was a deep love and passion for her, but as she became a wife and mother, she chose to serve her husband and to serve her children above her own interests. She cultivated a heart that loved and enjoyed doing that. So she was and continues to be one of the greatest servants that I know."

But as a teenager, Wuerffel admits that his idea of being a Christian was mostly about being good and avoiding bad behavior. In high school, this attitude (albeit misguided) certainly had its merits. The young football star stayed out of trouble and performed exceptionally in the classroom. In fact, Wuerffel graduated as the class valedictorian. His playing career was pretty phenomenal as well, made evident by his team's 4A state title in 1991 and number two national ranking in *USA Today* that same year.

Wuerffel's stellar high-school career led to a scholarship offer from the University of Florida, where he led the Gators to four Southeastern Conference titles from 1993 to 1996 and the National Championship in 1996. He was also the 1996 Heisman Trophy winner and ended his college career with a combined 17 NCAA and Florida records.

Amid the staggering hype, the two-time All-American and two-time Davey O'Brien Award winner took the first step in a painstaking process of discovering the true nature of having a personal relationship with Christ. While many of Wuerffel's teammates were taking full advantage of their newfound freedoms in college, he found himself studying the Bible with an older gentleman who became Wuerffel's most-trusted mentor.

"We began studying in the Scriptures, and I was overcome by God's holiness," Wuerffel says. "To see how holy God was began to expose more and more the parts of my heart that I grew to realize weren't holy. Sin was not only the things that I did, but things that I said, things that I was thinking and the motives for the things that I did. So I realized that many of the things that motivated me to be a good person were fear, worrying about what people think, image and reputation, and that even the good things I did were so often motivated by sinful things. That really put me back on my knees, craving forgiveness."

As he grew closer to God, Wuerffel also discovered the importance of being involved with a community of believers. That led him to the University of Florida's Fellowship of Christian Athletes chapter, where he became a dedicated member and faithful participant. Wuerffel is still actively involved with FCA and regularly speaks at the University of Florida as well as at other FCA venues throughout the region.

The next step in Wuerffel's spiritual growth process was to come to the understanding that a true relationship with Jesus means a life consumed with the concept of serving others. He recalls his mother's influence as a primary example of serving, but he also cites Bible stories such as the parable of the Good Samaritan and the selfless ministry of Christ.

"I realized that God was calling us not just to allow the gospel of grace to minister to our hearts," Wuerffel says, "but as it flows through our hearts, the natural response and reaction should be to love God and other people—to love not in word but in deed so that our actions would minister to people."

When Wuerffel was drafted by the New Orleans Saints in 1997, he took his burgeoning desire to serve others along with him. It didn't take long for Wuerffel to hear about a local ministry that was founded seven years earlier by a man named Mo Leverett. His program—Desire Street Ministries—was located in the Ninth Ward's infamous Desire Street neighborhood, which was historically known as the city's worst neighborhood due to the prevalence of drugs, violence and depravity. Initially, Wuerffel had no plans to get involved. That all changed after he made that first visit.

"As I drove in, I saw this old housing project created in the 1950s," Wuerffel says. "At one point it had over 15,000 people living in a small area, stacked on top of each other with a barbed-wire fence around. It was said to keep them safe but looked more like a prison than a community. It was known as one of the most dangerous places in the country to live, with the highest crime rate. As I drove in the project, the buildings were in such bad condition that they looked like they should have been condemned years before. Not only were they not condemned, they were still standing. I thought it had to be a danger to live there; and as I was

considering the terrible state of these buildings, a little girl walked out of one of the buildings with a doll. I realized she lived in that building. It just didn't make sense.

"It made me frustrated, sad and confused. Here I was playing professional football a few miles from this place in the Superdome—the Superdome where we played the Sugar Bowl and the National Championship for the University of Florida—and yet in this place not far from me, it looked more like a third-world country than what you would expect in a city of the United States of America."

Once Wuerffel got involved with Desire Street Ministries, he was immediately hooked. He started volunteering, teaching Bible studies, playing with the kids and helping to raise money. Through his efforts, many new facilities were built, including a gymnasium, a health clinic and a school. Even though he was still playing in the NFL, Wuerffel was giving equal amounts of time and energy to Desire Street.

"One of the first things that attracted me to the ministry was looking in the eyes of these children and seeing so much God-given potential," Wuerffel says. "But this situation they were born into created so few opportunities for them to fulfill their God-given potential and use their gifts. So the children drew me in."

Wuerffel was also attracted by the ministry's vision of not just providing spiritual development and community development, but providing both together in a balanced, holistic package. That philosophy comes from James 1:27, where believers are called to take care of the orphans and widows. Another aspect that appealed to Wuerffel was Desire Street's concept of raising future leaders who would be empowered to inspire and facilitate positive change throughout the entire community.

During that time, Wuerffel continued to play in the NFL, although his professional career paled in comparison to the success he had experienced at the collegiate level. Over the next seven years, he spent time with the Saints, the Green Bay Packers, the Chicago Bears and the Washington Redskins. Wuerffel even spent time as a member of the Rhein Fire in the now-defunct NFL Europe, where he was named MVP of the World Bowl in 2000.

By January 2004, Wuerffel was unsigned but still planning to continue his career. He decided to work part-time with Desire Street Ministries while spending the rest of his day training and seeking out a free-agency deal. But by February, Wuerffel found himself terribly conflicted and felt torn between his two very different worlds.

"Every day I was driving down Canal Boulevard to get on the interstate, and every time I would have to turn right to go train and continue my dream of playing with the NFL," Wuerffel remembers. "So I would have to turn right to go practice football, but I would have to turn left to go to Desire Street; and every day it got harder and harder to turn right. After a little bit of time of doing that, I ended up retiring from the NFL and went to work full time with Desire Street Ministries."

Finally, the call to serve won out, and Wuerffel retired from professional football in order to pursue full-time ministry—a lifestyle that the athletic man describes as "incredibly exhausting and exhilarating."

Desire Street Ministries was extremely successful in transforming the lives of kids who were previously selling drugs, carrying guns and stealing cars. Their lives were being changed by

God's love and the teaching of the gospel. Wuerffel says many of these young people are now married and raising children, having broken the vicious cycle of hopelessness.

And then there was Katrina. It was August 2005 when the iconic hurricane swept across the Gulf Coast, leaving a path of horrific destruction that devastated significant portions of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and the Florida panhandle. The Ninth Ward was particularly challenged by hurricane damage, and Desire Street Ministries faced some difficult decisions.

"If I even tried to recall all the things that really made it look impossible to continue, we would be here forever," Wuerffel says. "The ministry was completely flooded and devastated. Everybody was spread all over the country. There was no way to communicate. We were afraid thousands had died. The staff was charged to take care of the students that were scattered and lost. They, including my family, had lost all of their possessions. We all had our own personal crises to deal with in the midst of the devastation with children and the families. And to make matters worse, it was at a time at the end of the summer when funds were really low, and we didn't know if we could continue. Yet one by one, God just walked us through, around and above each of these challenges and insurmountable obstacles."

Slowly but surely, Wuerffel and the rest of the Desire Street team began picking up the pieces. Initially, the ministry was reestablished in Florida. Wuerffel found people to help him find the students from Desire Street Academy—the educational arm of Desire Street Ministries—and bring them from shelters back to the new home base. Eventually, the school was moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in time for the 2006-07 academic year. Many of its students are male high-school students who were displaced from New Orleans, but youth from Baton Rouge are also finding their way to the ministry.

The two-year process was exhausting on all levels, but Wuerffel believes that both his family and the ministry are stronger for having pushed through the trials. "I was drained in ways I never thought I could be, but at the same time my spirit was so alive," he says. "And spiritually I never felt closer to the Lord. I was so dependent on Him in intense personal moments of worship. So I just praised God in the midst of the most difficult times in which He was working, leading and guiding us. He was replenishing our hearts and our souls."

One of the most amazing aspects of Wuerffel's story is the fact that he walked away from what could have been a much longer NFL career in order to pursue a life of serving. It was a bold leap of faith that is virtually unheard of in today's self-absorbed, materialistic culture.

"It seems like I have continued to get a lot of the attention in terms of the sacrifice that I've made," Wuerffel says. "I guess in some ways it was a sacrifice—certainly in terms of making a lot of money. I think there were a lot more things that would be considerably easier to do that would be a lot less stressful for me and my family. But at the same time, I really don't even feel like it has been a sacrifice. I feel like it was the natural thing for me to do. When I finally discussed retiring from the NFL with my wife, because I felt the Lord was leading me to go full time with the ministry, I thought she would be surprised. But her reaction was very telling. She said very calmly that she thought this is what I would be doing all along, because that is what I liked to do."

Wuerffel is also quick to point out others in the ministry who "have made considerably more sacrifices." He is very thankful to be part of a team that includes so many faithful servants. But when it comes to personal sacrifice, Wuerffel is much more interested in what the Bible has to say. In 2 Corinthians 4:18, for example, the apostle Paul wrote, "So we do not focus on what

is seen, but on what is unseen; for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

It's that spiritual reality that inspires Wuerffel to look at God's big picture and spend less time worrying about temporal things such as professional ambitions, materialistic gains, personal grievances and physical vanities. For Wuerffel, that means opening his eyes and noticing what is going on in the world around him.

“One of the biggest problems in America is that we are so busy,” Wuerffel says. “We can live for days and weeks, even years, in a very small bubble. We get up and go to work, we come home, we go in the garage and shut the door. We don't even know our neighbors. We may have a small group of people we associate with, but we insulate ourselves from the devastation we might see on the news, to the reality of suffering that is all around us. So as we open our eyes to see—and we don't have to see far—but if we take the effort to look around us and take the energy to look around and see people that are broken and people that are suffering, it can be discouraging. I think that it's one of the reasons we hide from it. That is why the verse 2 Corinthians 4:18 is so powerful. It gives us power to see those things—not to just see them for what they are, but to see them from an eternal perspective.”

Along with the newly reestablished Desire Street Academy in Baton Rouge, Wuerffel is working toward going back to New Orleans and redeveloping the ministry in its original home. Desire Street Ministries is also supporting programs similar to its own, including an outreach program in the west side of Montgomery, Alabama, which is being patterned after Desire Street.

And for Wuerffel, all of those endeavors simply represent the beginning of a life-long commitment to fulfill the second great commandment found in Mark 12:31. In that powerful passage, Jesus flatly tells all of His followers, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“While I look at someone that is hurting, as I look at a broken community,” Wuerffel says, “I pray that God would give me the ability and honesty to look and understand it. I pray that I have the ability to fix my eyes on eternity and see what God can do in the midst of this brokenness. The things I see are temporary, and what God is doing is eternal, and that gives me great hope and confidence that my serving is not in vain.”

## Go

1. Danny Wuerffel was the stereotypical good kid growing up, but in college he discovered that “sin was not only the things that I did, but things that I said, things that I was thinking and the motives for the things that I did.” How does his realization line up with your personal concept of living the Christian life?
2. What motivates you to do your best in athletics, in school or on the job? How much of your desires are driven by what other people think about you versus what God thinks about you? What would you say motivates you to serve others?
3. Read James 1:27. When you read this verse—the principle upon which Desire Street Ministries was founded—do you feel indifferent, inspired, overwhelmed or something else? What are some practical ways you might start to live out the command to take care of orphans, widows and people who are less fortunate than you?
4. Read 2 Corinthians 4:18. How often do you think about life after death? What usually comes to mind when you are considering the concept of eternity? How might thinking more often about eternity change the way you approach serving?
5. Read Mark 12:28-31. Who do you think Jesus is referring to when He talks about

neighbors? How does the command to love your neighbor as yourself affect the way you look at those around you? How does it change your current desire to serve and bless others?

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James 1



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