

I wanted to give you guys an update on the experience I had this weekend when I entered the Federal Correctional Institution in Bastrop, TX to use softball as a way to spread the word of God. First off, I want to preface this story by saying that I really don't remember how I got involved in this. It almost seems as if I was ushered into this role by a higher power, which I believe is probably the case. One thing led to another and I was anxiously awaiting the opportunity. God knew that I would be the kind of person to embrace such a unique method of ministry, and that I was ready in my heart and mind to embark on such a journey. I knew nothing of what was to come going in, but was excited at the thought of the unknown.

On Friday night I arrived at the house of the team leader, Ray Cash. He was waiting out on his front lawn holding a bat in one hand, his cell phone in the other, and had a cigar in his mouth all the while managing to display an eager grin on his face. As I walked up to him he spoke out "Danny White! How are you Brother? God bless you!" What an awesome welcome from someone I have never met. About that time his wife and two daughters came out the front door to greet the visitor. This seemed like your average American family, I thought to myself. I could tell it would be a great trip if everyone was as open and exciting as Ray. About that time a second person pulled up and out stepped an average sized red headed guy with hair down to his shoulders or lower. This was Ronnie, or Bombo as the call him for his tendency to hit "bombs" on the softball field. It was obvious that Ray and Ronnie were very good friends by the way they told stories and laughed. It was the type of deep friendship unknown to me at this point in my life, but endearing to watch how deep their friendship was. We loaded up into the truck in McKinney and headed down the road to pick up a fourth member, Kirby.

On the way to Kirby's house about 25 minutes away, I was given a few "rules to live by" in the prison. 1. Don't tell anyone your last name 2. Don't tell anyone your family's names 3. Don't get upset when they call you names or are verbally abusive 4. Don't offer to deliver any messages to anyone outside of the prison 5. Don't get in a fight (whatever you do). Each one of those made me think, "What must have happened to have these rules created in the first place?" And as I expected, there was a story for each one. We picked up Kirby at his house, and I could tell once more that the three guys now in the truck were all very close. Closer than I am to any of my friends. I was starting to get the picture that this experience may be the catalyst to the friendships.

Finally we were on the road, and things took an unexpected turn. Through conversation, I quickly realized that what I had expected from this trip was already changing. I was in the presence of Godly men, as I expected, but not too long ago some were far from it. Seven years ago Ray Cash was homeless, addicted to crystal meth, cocaine, and was suicidal. He was living under a bridge in Dallas when he slit his wrists. This was a bridge where Ray didn't really expect to see anyone. A preacher in the area crossed paths with Ray, took him in and got him help. As Ray says "I was only supposed to stay for 3 days, and ended up staying for 3 months...like a typical speed addict!" Seven years later he is clean and sober, and one of the most spirit filled Christian men I have ever met. Ronnie and Ray have been friends for 25 years. Ronnie was an alcoholic, drug addict, and lived just as hard and fast as Ray. Interestingly, he kept a bag of candy close to his side at all times. Although not diabetic as I assumed, something was definitely unique about Ronnie. Kirby was the anomaly, or so it seems. He had a story, but I never quite got what it was. I know he attended Abilene Christian University, as does his son, and that his family seems perfectly normal. Then again, so did Ray's and Ronnie's. I was surprised to learn that the guys I would be playing with were ex-drug addicts and felons. But the reality is, in a way I wasn't. Consider the audience we would speak to. What does it mean to a widow when a married woman tells her she understands? Nothing, because she really doesn't understand. The men in these prisons have to know that the person speaking to them was as bad as or worse than they are before they realize God works in everybody.

I was told that this would be an experience that would change my life. These trips are usually textbook and without incident. I didn't even know if I would get to play, but I wanted to be there to see the hand of God at work. Something interesting happened to the team this trip though. There were 16 guys signed up to enter the prison and play. Only nine were able to make it. It takes ten just to fill every position in softball, but we only had nine. Kirby pondered this development and realized that as was the case with Gideon and the thousands of men he brought, God knew we didn't need sixteen, and that we only needed nine. Each of us thought, "Surely we will need at least twelve to have subs and be rested", and God gave us nine. "Surely though we can't be competitive with only nine guys lord, we need at least ten to even cover the field!", and God gave us nine. We were playing what was considered to be one of the better prison softball teams in the state of Texas. These guys have been practicing for this very day. They have worked overtime to be able to earn the right to play softball on this very Saturday.

This was a privilege for them to participate in this freedom. We know this team is good Lord, and you send nine guys to fight this battle when they will have at least 14? God sent nine guys that day, and each one of them wore a shirt with his name on it and a hat with a picture of the cross his son died on. These nine guys were specifically chosen by God himself out of the 25 on the roster to be on that field on that very day. From the day that I was born, God knew that on this day, he would send me to be a part of something bigger than myself. The thought of what he had in mind for us was an emotional one to say the least. As we entered the gates of the prison, it was obvious that we were getting a mixed review. I told Jessica that I have heard cussing in music, film, and in person, but nothing can quite explain the language used by inmates. Although none of us were ever insulted or threatened, it was an interestingly hostile yet friendly environment. The path from the gates to the field took us through guys with full jump suits on, some with shorts and no shirt, some with sunglasses on, some without. Some had bandannas, some hats; some actually dressed up and looked decent. And then there were the guys that I expected to be there; the ones you see in movies. The groups with shaved heads, swastikas on their chests, and those with their shirts buttoned only at the top. There were guys out in the weight room, and those that looked like they were up to no good. But our walk from the gates to the field was clear, and I felt as though we were walking onto a battlefield. Although we were walking into a federal prison, I felt honored, famous in a way. Through the taunting and whistling, the faces of these men mostly said “we’re glad you’re here and we’re just giving you a hard time”. About ten steps onto the field we could see the prison team. Their uniforms were nicer than ours, they were stretching in formation, and they were huge! The field looked immaculate, and we could tell they had spent many an hour mowing, raking, and watering this battlefield we were about to embark upon.

Our dugout was small, dark, and smelled horrible. We identified the smell coming from the multitude of dead crickets lining the entire back wall. Although I don’t believe the inmates planted the dead crickets, the thought did cross my mind. We were right beside the main set of bleachers, just close enough to listen to the constant taunts. Being the “visiting” team (which sadly means prison is “home” for these guys); we were up to bat first. Before the game started, we walked to the center of the field and prayed. In my mind I quietly said “Lord, you have a plan for us today that we don’t readily understand. Each of us was selected by you to be here today and no where else. Each of us has the strength, the will, and the talent to accomplish whatever it is you have in store for us today Lord. We come here in your name with the Holy Spirit inside us to represent the light in the darkness.

Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear NO evil, for you are with us. Allow your spirit to transform us into the disciples you need us to be. And dear Lord, let us put a whoopin' on these guys that can only come from you!" Amen. I have to be honest and tell you that I have never seen such amazing softball in my whole life. Not only was the prison team extremely talented, but the team I was on played beyond our abilities that day. With nine players, at least five short of what the other team had, we played into extra innings and won by a score of 12-9.

Writing this full of pride with what we accomplished, I can sit here and tell you that God did have a plan that day. He chose those nine guys out of the entire world to be there on that field. To show every eye that was watching that even with a group of drug addicts, convicts, alcoholics, and a few others thrown in for other reasons, he can transform people, he can change lives, and he can give you strength you yourself have never seen before. I played softball that day better than I ever have. I played with a group of guys I had never met before, and had only one thing in common with. And I realized that I gained the respect of the inmates not because I was rich, or successful, or had more stuff than the next guy, but I gained their respect because I was powerful with the Holy Spirit, and God does amazing things with what he has to work with. We had around 60 men give a profession of faith that day. I looked men in the eye that thought their life was over behind those walls. They thought they could do nothing for their families behind those walls. But what they learned was that the best thing they can do is to be a spiritual leader for their families, and everything will follow, even if behind those walls. When before we came they thought nothing of us, they know now that nine guys came into that valley that day, into hostility, into disrespect, into disadvantage, not only to play softball, but to show everyone that God is powerful in all of us and to spread the message that God loves you, we love you, and one day we will all be playing softball together in Heaven.