

~ Chapter One ~

No Matter What

Billy was playing second base. He stood in a low crouch about fifteen feet from the bag; the glove resting on his leg covered his limb from the middle of his thigh down to his shin. Billy's arm was disproportionately small, giving the appearance of a huge swirling lollipop on a stick. All the nine-year-olds on the Rocklin Giants team were similar in appearance; cute kids with bright faces playing ball on a summer day, whose four-foot something bodies were too small for their hats and gloves. It was a sight all moms and dads dreamed of when their children were born. Ben, Billy's dad, and the coach of the Giants could not have been happier doing anything else other than exactly what he was doing.

"All right boys, let's get tough on defense. Three up and three down," yelled Ben from the dugout. "Infield play tight, nothing gets into the outfield." It was the bottom of the sixth inning and the Giants were ahead seven to six. If they could keep the other team from scoring, the game would be over and the Giants could finally put a check in the win column.

The first batter was a tall kid, with red hair flowing from underneath his batting helmet, covering his forehead in uneven waves. He swung at the first pitch, something Ben coached his players not to do because in this league, as the first pitch was almost always a ball. It didn't matter because the redhead hit the ball hard directly at the second baseman. The crowd on both sides of home plate rose to their feet and screamed.

Ben yelled at his son, "Your ball Billy – get him at first." A fundamental rule in baseball is to do things in steps. First catch the ball, and then throw the ball. While the second baseman for the Giants normally caught routine grounders, sometimes he had his moments when he forgot the rule. The red-haired batter was one of those moments. Billy had plenty of time to make the play, but he was in so much of a hurry to throw the ball to first base that he never fully made the catch, and as a result, he dropped the baseball as his arm moved backwards to make the throw. The batter was safe at first base.

"That's okay, Billy. You'll get the next one. Everyone, the play is at second base," shouted the coach. But it wasn't okay with Billy. He was mad at himself for dropping the ball. He knew everyone was watching him.

The next batter was a small kid with blond hair and feet that looked much too big for his body. However, his big feet somehow helped his bat because he hit a screamer to the short stop - a perfect ball for a double play. The shortstop fielded the ball cleanly and flipped it to Billy at second, who caught the ball, but pulled his foot from the bag while making the throw to first.

The runner was safe at second, but the batter was out at first, one half of a double play – the wrong half.

Billy's head dropped and he began to draw pictures in the dirt with his toe. He didn't want to look up. He had made another error. The catcher yelled, "One down," and the team moved back to their positions.

The third batter was Eric Collins, a massive guy with the best hitting percentage in the league. Every Giant took three steps back and got ready. The pitcher looked nervous. He did not want to pitch to Eric. Eric always got a hit.

"Just throw strikes, he can't hit," the coach encouraged. Unfortunately, the hitter didn't listen, but the pitcher did. He threw a strike on his first pitch and Eric Collins connected with a good swing. All eyes were focused towards heaven as the ball soared high over the ball field, not landing until it was forty feet into the parking lot past the left field fence. It was the longest home run either team had ever seen. Game over: the Giants lost eight to seven.

Billy waited in the dugout after the game while his dad talked with other coaches, players and parents. He sat silently, his feet swinging back and forth through the dust under the bench.

"Ready to go, son?" asked his dad. Billy did not say a word or raise his head. His father knew something was really wrong because there were strict rules in the house about showing respect for your parents, and that meant answering his father when asked a question.

"Billy, what's wrong?" The coach's son lifted his head to reveal a little boy with tears streaming down both cheeks leaving muddy trails in their wake. Billy's lip quivered.

"It's my fault we lost Dad. It's all my fault. I suck at baseball. I should be cut from the team." It came out fast, like it had been caught in his throat, and he coughed his confession up in one big wad of pain and hurt. Ben walked to where Billy was sitting and knelt down to one knee, placing both his big hands on the second baseman's shoulders.

"It's like I always say Billy, we win as a team and we lose as a team. Tonight was not your fault, we all share in the outcome, including me," said Ben, sounding as much as a coach as he could.

"I love you son, everything will be okay."

"How can you love me Dad? I can't even throw a baseball from second to first base." Ben leaned in close for a big hug with his son. He wiped the dirty tears from Johnny's face, and holding the nine-year-old he declared, "I love you Billy. I will always love you, no matter what."



'I will love you no matter what' may be the most important statement a parent can make to his or her child. It is the definition of unconditional love. Love that is not based upon the current, or past, situation or circumstance, but rather on a deeply rooted, unbreakable bond

between a parent and child that started with God himself. While it may have seemed incredible to Ben that his son could question his love for him just because he played poorly in a baseball game, Johnny needed the reminder that the love from his father was unchanged – no matter what.

Just making the statement, however, is not enough. We must live the meaning of unconditional love every day. That's 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days for 52 weeks each year, of all out, pedal to the metal, 100% committed love.

We must love our daughter's equally when they run toward us with hands stretched out when we get home from work, as when in the teen years they sometimes act like we do not exist. We must love her same, when on her seventeenth birthday she announces she is pregnant, as when, as a single parent your daughter graduates with honors at college.

When he is twenty-four years old, your son robs a liquor store and is sentenced to prison. Later in the courtroom, dressed in orange, his hands and feet bound by chains, as the bailiff leads him away he turns and stares at you with sad lonely eyes. In that moment, you must show the same love for him as when he took his first step twenty three years earlier. Our love must be as constant and dependable as a sunrise. No matter how thick and turbulent the clouds, the sun will always rise. Consistent, dependable, reliable love.

But, does unconditional love mean accepting anything a child may do, good or bad? No, unconditional love doesn't eliminate our experiencing anger, resentment, hurt feelings, or any other human emotion, it doesn't mean that parents have to stop parenting. Unconditional love just trumps all other feelings, rendering them to second place, at best.

We must learn to be angry, but with love, we must dispense discipline with compassion and love. We must try to love our children in the same way our Father loves us: Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you (Isaiah 54:10).

Living our hectic, sometimes out of control lives with a goal of projecting unconditional love seems a daunting task, perhaps even an impossible request. And, it would be if not for two very important facts. Without a doubt, there will be times in our children's lives where we will fail, times when our love does not shine through, and when that happens, God will be at our side to help us recognize our mistake, comfort us, and teach us once again how to love as we are loved. Because God loves us unconditionally, He will teach us how to be more like Him. We can learn unconditional love from its inventor.



Billy was still angry at himself for committing errors in the game, but after the hug from his Dad in the dugout the memory of the game faded quickly, leaving behind the warm certainty of his Father's love.

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### **Thoughts for WARRIORS**

*When we commit a sin that is so terrible in our mind, we can wait for a long time to confess to the person we love. In 1989, I committed adultery with the woman I am married to today, and we have a daughter named Nicole. We knew at some point we would have to tell her how we met, and the circumstances surrounding our marriage. Before we could tell her, somehow other kids at her school found out the truth, and told her before we could. My confession came on a park bench, when I had to tell my little girl of my failure. She asked questions like, "Daddy, why didn't you tell me? How could you have done this? I will never trust you again!" My heart was broken; it was the worst time in my life. We sat on that bench talking and praying, while I tried to explain to her that I was not the man then that I was before. Unconditional love is when your child looks into your eyes and tells you that they do not understand, but that they love and care for you, no matter what. She held my hand and said, "I guess even my hero needs love and forgiveness." We still have wounds that need healing, but unconditional love is greater than the wound.*

G.Z.

#### **Points to consider:**

1. Unconditional love is not the acceptance of one's actions, but always the acceptance of the one.
2. The strength of any relationship is found in times of failure, not success.
3. Why love unconditionally? Because you will need it very soon.

#### **Ask yourself these questions:**

1. Can you name one time when you received unconditional love from another person?
2. Can you list three people that have hurt you deeply and you need to love unconditionally?
3. What game in life did you lose that you have never forgiven yourself for?

#### **Scripture: Psalm 23:6**

*Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*