
How to Love Someone Hard to Love

The Christian Call to Love in the Face of Betrayal

by Oludare Akinbo

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"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." — Luke 23:34 NKJV

This reflection begins where so many quiet, private struggles begin: with a betrayal that was never supposed to happen, delivered by hands we had every reason to trust. It follows that wound honestly — into what it does to the heart, what Scripture says about it, and what our Lord Jesus Christ asks of us in its aftermath. The goal is neither to minimise the pain nor to excuse the one who caused it, but to walk the narrow road that leads from a wounded heart back to a heart still able to love.

The Wound That Rearranges Everything

There is a particular silence that falls in a home after the truth comes out. A phone left face-up on a table. A conversation overheard that was never meant to be. A name in a message that should not have been there. In a single moment, someone you trusted completely becomes a stranger wearing a familiar face, and the ground you had built your ordinary life upon is simply gone.

Most people will, at some point, know something of that moment. Not merely the unintentional letdown that flows from ordinary human weakness, nor the mild disappointment any relationship occasionally brings, but the intentional, soul-wounding kind of personal betrayal — often at the hands of someone, or several someones, they deeply trusted and even loved. A spouse. A sibling. A friend. A spiritual leader. A confidant. Someone who was, until the moment everything changed, on the inside of the wall rather than outside it.

When that happens, something shifts inside. For many, the wound does not simply leave a scar that heals over with time; it quietly rearranges the entire architecture of their trust. Rooms that were once open are sealed. Doors that once swung freely are bolted. They begin to live behind emotional walls, and they adopt as a kind of creed the phrase that has become the mantra of the wounded everywhere: "trust no one."

On the surface, that sounds like hard-won wisdom — the tone of someone who has been around long enough to know better. But held as an absolute rule for living, it is in truth a quiet tragedy.

To live perpetually guarded and suspicious. To regard every person as a potential threat until proven otherwise. To shut down the very capacity for deep, meaningful human connection because of what one person, or a handful of people, once did — that is not wisdom. That is emotional exile. It is not healing; it is a slow, invisible heartbreak that outlasts the original wound by years, sometimes by a lifetime.

And yet this is precisely where many sincere people find themselves: bitter, cynical, hardened, unable to believe in the goodness of others, and — worse still — no longer able to love freely. The betrayal took one relationship; the response to it slowly takes all the others.

This is not the life our Lord Jesus Christ calls us to. And it leads us to a claim that will govern everything else in this reflection: **the true test of the Christian faith is not, finally, how well we love those who are easy to love — it is whether we can learn to love the one who is hardest to love: the**

person who has wounded us.

He Was Betrayed by a Friend

It is worth pausing on a detail we can too easily rush past: our Lord Jesus Christ was not betrayed by a stranger. He was betrayed by a friend.

Judas was not an outsider who slipped through the ranks. He was handpicked by Christ Himself, chosen and named among the Twelve (Luke 6:13–16). He walked the dusty roads of Galilee beside the Lord. He served alongside Him. He heard the Sermon on the Mount with his own ears, watched the blind receive their sight and the dead rise, and was even sent out with the others to preach and to heal (Matthew 10:1–4). He carried the money box (John 12:6). He dipped his bread in the same bowl as the Master (Matthew 26:23). For three years he was, by every outward measure, an insider.

And yet, when the hour came, Judas betrayed Him — and betrayed Him with a kiss (Luke 22:47–48), turning the very gesture of affection into the instrument of treachery. There are few images in all of Scripture more piercing than that: intimacy weaponised, a sign of love made the signal for arrest.

Consider, then, what the Lord did with that betrayal.

Still, earlier that same evening, He had knelt and washed Judas's feet along with the others (John 13:5, 11) — knowing full well whose feet they were. Still, in the garden, at the very moment of the betraying kiss, He addressed him not with a curse but with a word that must have cut deeper than any rebuke: "Friend, why have you come?" (Matthew 26:50). Still, He allowed the betrayal to unfold without bitterness and without vengeance, knowing it was woven into a divine plan of redemption far larger than the treachery of one man.

This is the scandal of grace: that even when Jesus knew Judas would fail Him — knew it before He ever chose him — He loved him still. And this is the very kind of love we are called to. Not a naive, boundary-less sentimentality that pretends no wound was inflicted, but a pure, deliberate, God-empowered love that overcomes evil with good (Romans 12:21).

We should be clear about one thing, because it anchors everything else: the Lord Jesus Christ did not hate Judas. He never behaved toward him with hostility, never exposed him to shame before the others, never withdrew the ordinary kindness of fellowship. He chose him knowing what he would become, and let him walk in the closest circle for three and a half years. On the last night He washed his feet with the rest, and when He revealed that one would betray Him, He did not name Judas aloud or turn the others against him — the disclosure was so quiet that the others did not even understand it (John 13:26–28). At the very arrest, the word He reached for was "Friend" (Matthew 26:50). His hardest saying — that it would have been better for that man not to have been born (Matthew 26:24) — is probably a lament over the sheer horror of the deed and the ruin it brought, not the language of hatred. We cannot presume

to read the mind of Christ, but from the consistent fruit of His life, His nature, and the unconditional love of God that dwelt in Him, it can reasonably be inferred. A person may love a dog gone rabid and still, with grief, put it down — without a trace of hatred in the act. Love kept the door open to the very end; it was Judas who walked out of it. And that is precisely the posture we are called to: to keep loving, to keep the door open, to refuse hostility and shaming — and to leave the outcome, as Christ did, in the hands of God.

Scripture's View of Trust Is Discernment, Not Distrust

Many wounded believers reach for a single verse to justify their emotional isolation: “Do not put your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help” (Psalm 146:3). And it is true — gloriously, necessarily true — that Scripture warns against placing our *ultimate* trust in any human being, because every human being is fallible. Only God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and unfailingly good. Only He is worthy of the deepest dependence of the soul.

But notice what that verse is actually doing. It does not command suspicion; it offers perspective, pointing us to where the heart's foundation must finally rest. It reminds us that people — even the most well-meaning among them — will sometimes fail us, and that when they do, we need not shatter, because our security was never meant to sit on so fragile a footing in the first place.

Rather than the flat, defensive “trust no one” that the wounded so often adopt, what Scripture actually teaches is something far more liveable: **trust God fully, and trust people wisely.**

This single reframing changes everything about how we move through the world. If we truly grasp that even people of genuine goodwill can fail us — because they are finite creatures, not because they are villains — then we are far better positioned to forgive them, to endure their failures, and to go on loving them. Not because they have always earned it, but because God Himself has dealt with us on exactly those terms.

“ *The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy... He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities... For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.*

— Psalm 103:8, 10, 14 NKJV

We are dust. Fragile, formed, fallible dust. And so is everyone who has ever wounded us. God, knowing exactly what we are made of — remembering the dust when we ourselves forget it — loves us still, and withholds the repayment our sins have earned. The person who has grasped how much has been forgiven them holds the failures of others with a noticeably looser grip.

The Command That Sounds Impossible

Into this reality the Lord Jesus speaks words that, taken plainly, sound very nearly impossible:

“*Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.*

— Matthew 5:44 NKJV

That is radical love. That is Kingdom love. It is the kind of love that genuinely shocks a watching world and, in shocking it, transforms hearts — first the heart of the one who loves, and often, in time, the heart of the one loved.

We must be honest about what this love is and is not. It is not natural; it is supernatural. It is not easy; it is Spirit-enabled. No one summons it by gritting their teeth and trying harder. It is the fruit of a life surrendered to the God who first loved us while we were still His enemies (Romans 5:10). It is the love that forgives — not only for the sake of the offender, but for the freedom of the one who forgives. It is the love that guards the heart, not with hardness, but with the wisdom of heaven.

This is why the Lord could say, in the same breath in which He sent His disciples out among wolves, “Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Wisdom and harmlessness together. Alertness without malice. Discernment without poison. We are permitted — indeed commanded — to be shrewd about danger, and forbidden to let that shrewdness curdle into cruelty.

The Particular Pain of an Intimate Betrayal

There is a reason betrayal by someone close cuts in a way that opposition from an enemy never does, and Scripture names it with unflinching precision. David, who knew this wound from the inside, wrote about it again and again — not in self-pity, but in the honest cry of a man whose closest ties had turned against him.

“*For it is not an enemy who reproaches me; then I could bear it. Nor is it one who hates me who has exalted himself against me; then I could hide from him. But it was you, a man my equal, my companion and my acquaintance. We took sweet counsel together, and walked to the house of God in the throng.*

— Psalm 55:12-14 NKJV

Notice the paradox the wounded heart recognises instantly. The assault of an open enemy can be braced for; we expect it, and we can raise a defence against it. But the assault of a companion strikes at precisely

the place where no defence was ever raised, because no defence was ever thought necessary. The nearer the one who wounds us, the deeper the wound goes, because closeness is exactly the absence of a guard.

This is the wound our Lord Jesus Christ entered fully into. He did not love Judas from a safe distance, having kept part of Himself in reserve against the coming betrayal. He gave Judas real access — to His table, His teaching, His trust, His feet — and He absorbed the cost of that access when it was abused. The Christ who tells us to love our betrayers is not issuing a command He has kept Himself exempt from. He walked the road first, all the way to a cross, still praying for the forgiveness of the very men driving in the nails (Luke 23:34).

Understanding this does not make the wound hurt less. But it does change what the wound *means*. Betrayal is no longer proof that love was foolish; it becomes the very place where a Christlike love is tested, refined, and — by grace — proven real.

Two Men Who Failed the Same Night

On the night of the betrayal, two of the Lord's chosen men failed Him. We remember one as the archetype of treachery and the other as a key figure among the reputable leaders of the church (Galatians 2:2) — and the difference between them has almost nothing to do with the size of the failure and almost everything to do with what each man did with it afterward.

Judas betrayed the Lord for thirty pieces of silver. Peter, within hours, denied three times that he had ever known Him — the third denial cursed and vehement, spoken while the Lord was close enough to turn and look at him (Luke 22:60–61). By the plain measure of loyalty, both men fell. Both broke faith with the Friend who had loved them. Both felt, afterward, the crushing weight of what they had done.

But here the roads diverge. Judas was seized with remorse, returned the silver, confessed “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood” (Matthew 27:4) — and then carried that remorse *away* from the Lord, into isolation, and finally into self-destruction. Peter, too, was undone; he “went out and wept bitterly” (Luke 22:62). But Peter's sorrow, however agonising, kept its face turned toward the One he had failed. When the risen Christ sought him out on the shore of Galilee and asked three times “do you love Me?” — one question for each denial — Peter was there to answer, and to be restored (John 21:15–17).

The lesson is not that Peter's sin was smaller. It is that Peter's sorrow carried him *toward* mercy, while Judas's remorse carried him *away* from it. And this bears directly on our subject, for it cuts in two directions at once. When we have been the Judas in someone else's story — and there are seasons every honest heart can name — the door back to the Lord stands open, as it stood open to Peter. And when someone has been the Judas in ours, we are called to hold the same door open that Christ held open to Peter, refusing to be the one who bolts it shut.

We are not told the final state of Judas's soul; that is between him and his Creator, and it is not ours to pronounce. What we are shown is the pattern: sorrow that flees the light destroys, while sorrow that turns back toward the light is met by a Saviour already running to meet it.

Five Who Chose Blessing Over Bitterness

The call to love our betrayers is not an abstract ideal dropped on us without example. Scripture is full of men who were wounded by those closest to them and who, by grace, refused to let the wound have the last word. These accounts are preserved "for our admonition" (1 Corinthians 10:11) — not as distant heroics, but as mirrors held up to our own wounded hearts. In each, a single Hebrew or Greek word is left in the text to mark the very posture of the heart. Read them slowly.

Joseph and the Brothers Who Sold Him

Few betrayals in Scripture are as raw as Joseph's. He did not deny the evil — he named it plainly — then sincerely took steps and spoke words that only a healed heart, moved by God's Spirit, could form.

PERSON BOX

Joseph — Who Comforted the Brothers Who Sold Him

Genesis 37; 45:1–5; 50:19–21

By every reckoning, Joseph held the strongest grudge-rights in the Old Testament. His own brothers stripped him of the coat that marked their father's love, threw him into a pit, sat down to eat while he pleaded, and then sold him to passing traders for twenty pieces of silver (Genesis 37:23–28). He lost his home, his youth, his freedom, and years of his life to a dungeon on a false charge. When at last he stood as the second most powerful man in Egypt, with the very brothers who had sold him now bowing before him and entirely at his mercy, every door to revenge stood wide open.

He wept instead. The Hebrew of Genesis 50:21 says Joseph spoke *'al-libbam* — literally *'to their heart.'* It is the same tender phrasing used of a bridegroom wooing a bride (Hosea 2:14): not the cold speech of a victor granting clemency, but warm words spoken to comfort and reassure. And he framed the whole of it in a single sentence that has anchored the faith of the betrayed ever since: "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). He did not deny the evil — he named it plainly as evil — yet he refused to let it be the final word over either them or himself. Joseph teaches us that forgiveness is not pretending we were not wounded; it is trusting that God is writing a longer story than our injury.

David and the King Who Hunted Him

David served Saul faithfully — and was repaid with spears and armies. Twice he held his persecutor's life in his hand, and twice he refused — then genuinely mourned him when he died.

PERSON BOX

David — Who Would Not Touch the Man Hunting Him

1 Samuel 24; 26; 2 Samuel 1:17–27

David came into Saul's service and gave him faithful loyalty — played music to soothe his torment, fought his battles, married into his house — and was repaid with spears thrown at his head and armies sent to hunt him through the wilderness for years. Twice the hunted man found the hunter delivered helpless into his hands. His own men urged him to strike; here, surely, was God handing him the justice he was owed.

Twice David refused. "The LORD forbid that I should stretch out my hand against the LORD's anointed" (1 Samuel 26:11). The Hebrew word behind his restraint is *chalilah* — a strong exclamation of aversion, 'far be it from me!', the recoil of a heart at something it regards as unthinkable. To David, taking vengeance into his own hands was not merely unwise; it was a line he would not cross. His refusal was not weakness or lack of opportunity — he cut the corner of Saul's robe to prove he *could* have killed him — but a deliberate guarding of his own soul against becoming what pursued him.

The proof that this was true forgiveness and not mere political calculation came the day Saul finally died. David did not celebrate. He tore his clothes, wept, and composed a lament — "How the mighty have fallen!" (2 Samuel 1:19) — genuinely mourning the very man who had spent years trying to kill him. Bitterness cannot mourn its enemy. Only a heart that has truly released the grudge can grieve the one who caused the wound.

Stephen and the Men Who Stoned Him

Stephen had harmed no one; he had only preached the truth. As the stones fell, he spent his final breath not on a curse but on a loud, deliberate plea for his killers' forgiveness.

PERSON BOX

Stephen — Who Prayed for the Men Stoning Him

Acts 6:8–15; 7:54–60

Stephen had done nothing but preach the truth with grace and power. For it he was seized on false testimony, dragged outside the city, and stoned — one of the most brutal deaths imaginable, inflicted by men he had never harmed. If ever a dying man had earned the right to curse his killers, it was Stephen.

Instead, Luke tells us he *kneeled down and cried out with a loud voice*, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" (Acts 7:60). The Greek verb Luke chooses is *ekraxen* — not a faint whisper as consciousness failed, but a loud, deliberate cry wrung from the whole of him. Stephen spent his last measure of breath not on a scream of pain or protest, but on a loud, intentional plea for the forgiveness of the very men killing him. The phrase 'do not charge' (*mē stēsēs*) is an accounting term — 'do not set this to their account' — asking God to leave their ledger clean of the debt they were at that moment incurring against him.

And Scripture leaves a quiet detail at the scene: standing there, consenting to the death, holding the coats of the executioners, was a young man named Saul of Tarsus (Acts 7:58; 8:1). The one who would become the apostle Paul was, in the providence of God, first prayed for by the man he helped to kill. We never know what our love for our enemies may yet accomplish in them.

The Lord Jesus Christ and Those Who Crucified Him

No one ever had greater grounds for bitterness, or refused it more fully. Betrayed, denied, and abandoned, He forgave His killers even as the nails went in — and forgave them repeatedly.

PERSON BOX

The Lord Jesus Christ — Who Forgave From the Cross

Luke 22:47–48; 23:34; John 13:1–11

No one has ever had greater grounds for bitterness, or refused it more completely. He was sold by a chosen friend for the price of a slave, denied by another under oath, abandoned by nearly all, mocked, scourged, and nailed to a cross by men He had come to save. And He had known it all in advance. He washed Judas's feet knowing the betrayal was already set (John 13:11); He called him 'friend' at the very kiss (Matthew 26:50).

From the cross itself came the sentence that gathers the whole of this teaching: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). The Greek imperfect tense of the verb (*elegēn*, 'He was saying') suggests this was not a single utterance but something He said *repeatedly*, over and over, as the nails went in and the soldiers gambled for His clothing. He did not wait for the pain to end before forgiving; He forgave *in the very midst of it*. He did not demand repentance as the price of His love; He loved first, and made that love itself the summons home.

This is the pattern every wounded believer is invited into — not as an impossible burden laid upon us from outside, but as the very shape of the life Christ now lives within us by His Spirit. We do not manufacture this love. We receive it from the One who first loved us while we were still His enemies (Romans 5:10), and then let it flow outward to our own.

Paul and Those Who Deserted Him

At his trial, every friend abandoned Paul. He named the desertion honestly — and in the same breath asked God not to hold it against them.

PERSON BOX

Paul — Who Asked Mercy for Those Who Deserted Him

2 Timothy 4:9–18

At the end of his life, imprisoned in Rome and facing execution, Paul stood at his first legal defence utterly alone. "At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me" (2 Timothy 4:16). These were not strangers; they were fellow believers, co-workers, men who owed Paul their very faith. At the hour of his greatest need and deepest danger, when standing beside him carried real risk, every one of them melted away. The loneliness of that abandonment breathes through the whole letter.

PERSON BOX

Paul — Who Asked Mercy for Those Who Deserted Him (continued)

2 Timothy 4:9–18

Yet in the very next breath Paul writes: “May it not be charged against them” (2 Timothy 4:16). The Greek is *mē autois logistheîē* — again the language of the ledger, ‘may it not be reckoned to their account’ — the same commercial metaphor Stephen used, and a deliberate echo of the Lord’s own prayer. Paul had every right to name and shame the deserters; instead he named the desertion honestly and then, in the same sentence, cancelled the debt.

Notice the balance in him that this whole book has been pressing toward. Paul does not pretend the abandonment did not happen or did not hurt — he records it plainly. He even names Demas, who forsook him for love of the world, and warns Timothy of Alexander who did him harm (2 Timothy 4:10, 14–15). Clear eyes about people; no poison in the heart. He saw the failure without flinching, guarded himself wisely going forward, and still refused to let a grudge take root. That is the very posture of the mature believer: honest about the wound, free of the bitterness.

Five witnesses; one pattern. In every case the wound was genuine, the grievance would have seemed justified, and the road to bitterness lay wide open — and in every case the wounded one chose, by grace, to bless rather than to curse, to release rather than to reckon, to comfort rather than to condemn. They did not deny what was done to them. They simply refused to let it make them into something smaller than the God they served. And what was possible for them, by the same Spirit, is possible for us.

What This Love Is Not

Because this teaching is so easily twisted — sometimes by well-meaning people, sometimes by those who benefit from our confusion — it must be guarded with equal care. To love someone hard to love is emphatically **not** to deny that a real wrong was done, nor to enable ongoing harm, nor to return to unsafe places as though nothing had happened. This is not a call to be naive. It is an invitation to be free.

Loving the one who wounded us does not mean pretending the betrayal did not occur. Joseph named his brothers’ evil as evil. David called Saul’s pursuit what it was. Scripture never asks us to relabel sin as something softer in order to forgive it. Honesty about the wound is the precondition of real forgiveness, not its enemy.

Loving the one who wounded us does not mean the absence of boundaries. Our Lord entrusted Himself to no one indiscriminately; John tells us plainly that Jesus “did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men” (John 2:24). Boundaries and love are not opposites. A wise gardener does not tear up a wounded branch, but neither does he pretend a diseased one is healthy. We can forgive fully and still adjust the level of access we grant — not out of revenge, but out of prudence.

And loving the one who wounded us does not mean remaining in abuse or tolerating what is destructive. To release vengeance is not to invite further harm. A person can forgive a betrayer completely in their heart, wish them genuine good, pray sincerely for their restoration — and still, with a clear conscience, keep a wise distance. Forgiveness happens in the heart at once; the rebuilding of trust, where it is rebuilt at all, happens over time and is earned.

A QUIET WORD ON FORGIVENESS AND TRUST

Forgiveness and trust are not the same thing, and confusing them keeps many sincere believers trapped. Forgiveness is a gift we give freely, unilaterally, and immediately, because Christ commands it and because it sets our own heart free. Trust is different: it is rebuilt slowly, mutually, and on the evidence of changed behaviour. To forgive is not to hand the one who wounded you the same access they had before. You can release every debt against you and still be wise about the future. Grace in the heart; wisdom at the gate.

Why We Must Learn This Love

Someone will reasonably ask: why does this matter so much? Why press so hard on the duty to love the one who wounded us? The answer is that this love is, in the end, one of the most searching tests of faith the Christian life contains — and it is a test that frees the one who passes it far more than it serves the one who failed us.

To love the one who is hard to love is to choose freedom over bitterness, grace over grudges, and peace over poison. It is to refuse to let the person who hurt us continue to govern our inner life long after they have left it. Bitterness is a strange prison: it locks up the offended, not the offender. The betrayer often walks away untroubled, while the betrayed carries the wound for decades. To forgive is to set a prisoner free and to discover that the prisoner was ourselves.

“ Love suffers long and is kind... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

— 1 Corinthians 13:4, 7 NKJV

This kind of love is not blind — it is brave. It endures not because it is weak or unaware, but because it is rooted in something eternal and therefore cannot finally be exhausted by any earthly betrayal. It is the love that quietly resolves:

“I will not let your betrayal make me bitter. I will not become what hurt me. I will remain who Christ has called me to be, even when others fall short.”

The Slow Work of Being Healed

It would be dishonest to speak of loving someone who has hurt us as though it were a single decision made once and finished. For most wounded people it is not a moment but a road — and often a long one, walked in stages, with setbacks along the way. Naming those stages can keep us from despair when the healing feels slower than we wish.

Stage One — Honesty

Before a wound can be healed it must be admitted. Many believers, eager to appear spiritual, rush to say “it’s fine, I’ve forgiven them” while the injury still festers underneath, unacknowledged and therefore untreated. David did not do this. His psalms are full of raw, unedited grief laid openly before God. The road back to love begins not with pretending the wound is smaller than it is, but with telling God the truth about how deep it goes.

Stage Two — Grief

There is a real loss to be mourned in betrayal: the loss of the relationship as it was, the loss of the trust that can never simply be assumed again, sometimes the loss of a whole imagined future. Grief is not a lack of faith; it is the honest heart’s response to something genuinely broken. To skip it is not to be more spiritual but to leave the wound half-closed, where it will reopen at the smallest pressure.

Stage Three — The Decision to Forgive

This is a decision, made by the will, long before the feelings follow. Forgiveness is not waiting until we feel warm toward the offender; it is choosing, before God, to release the debt and to renounce the right to revenge, and then asking Him to bring the heart slowly into line with the choice. Feelings are poor commanders but faithful followers; they will, in time, catch up to a will that has genuinely surrendered the grievance.

Stage Four — The Release of Vengeance

This is the handing of the scales to God. As long as we are determined to see the offender suffer, we remain chained to them, endlessly monitoring whether justice has been done. Paul’s counsel is liberating precisely because it is a handing-over: “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (Romans 12:19). The God who sees what we cannot see, and judges more justly than we ever could, is a safer keeper of the scales than our wounded hearts.

Stage Five — The Return of the Capacity to Love

This final stage comes slowly, and not necessarily toward the one who wounded us, though sometimes even there, but outward again toward life and toward others. This is the true sign that healing has done its work: not that we have forgotten, but that the memory no longer governs us; not that we trust foolishly, but that we can once more trust wisely; not that we are unscarred, but that the scar has become a mark of survival rather than an open wound.

None of this is achieved by willpower alone. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in a surrendered heart, and it moves at the pace of grace, not the pace of our impatience. If you are somewhere on this road and not yet at its end, take heart: the God who began the good work is faithful to complete it (Philippians 1:6).

Ten Marks of a Love That Has Survived Betrayal

What does this love actually look like once it has passed through the fire? Not in theory, but in the ordinary texture of a life? Below are ten marks of a heart that has been betrayed and has chosen, by grace, to keep loving. None of them is dramatic. All of them are the quiet evidence of a soul that refused to let a wound have the final word.

1 It forgives before it is asked.

It does not wait for an apology that may never come. Like the father watching the road for the prodigal, it has already decided to forgive long before the offender arrives — because its freedom does not depend on the other person's repentance.

2 It refuses to keep a ledger.

It does not maintain a running account of the wrong, rehearsing the details to keep the grievance fresh. Love "thinks no evil" (1 Corinthians 13:5); it releases the record rather than filing it away for future use.

3 It speaks of the offender without venom.

How we talk about those who have failed us, especially when they are not present, reveals the true state of our heart. A love that has healed can name the wrong honestly without dressing every mention in contempt.

4 It prays for the one who caused the pain.

Not a bitter, performative prayer, but a genuine desire for the person's good and restoration — the hardest and most transforming prayer a wounded heart can pray, and the one that most surely heals the one who prays it.

5 It sets boundaries without building hatred.

It can say a clear and even permanent 'no' to further harm while holding no malice in the heart. The distance it keeps is prudence, not punishment; a closed door, not a clenched fist.

6 It does not let one betrayal condemn everyone.

It resists the lie that because one person proved false, all people are suspect. It refuses to sentence future friends to prison for a crime they did not commit.

7 It remains open to being loved again.

Perhaps the hardest mark of all: it does not so wall itself off that no new trust can ever enter. It keeps the capacity for connection alive, even after connection has cost it dearly.

8 It entrusts the final justice to God.

It releases the need to see the offender punished, resting instead in the promise, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord' (Romans 12:19). It hands the scales to the only Judge who can hold them rightly.

9 It lets the wound become wisdom, not cynicism.

It allows the experience to make it more discerning without making it hard — wiser about danger, but not colder toward people. The scar teaches; it does not embitter.

10 It keeps its own soul as the first priority.

Above guarding reputation or property, it guards the heart (Proverbs 4:23), refusing to let the betrayer's sin reproduce itself as sin in the one betrayed. Its deepest concern is not what was done to it, but who it is becoming.

So What Does It Mean to Love Someone Hard to Love?

If we gather all of this together, the meaning becomes clear, and it is both more demanding and more freeing than the wounded heart first imagines.

To love the one who is hard to love means learning to forgive deeply — not a shallow, teeth-gritted truce, but a real release of the debt owed to us. It means remaining open-hearted without being reckless, holding the tension between genuine warmth and honest wisdom. It means moving forward with discernment rather than paranoia, refusing to let suspicion become the permanent lens through which we see every face. And it means choosing to believe that human kindness and goodness are still possible — because God is still at work in human hearts, including, perhaps, the very heart that wounded us.

It is never to stay in unsafe places or to tolerate abuse. But it is to release vengeance, to guard the heart with grace rather than with hardness, and to keep living in a posture of love, faith, and hope even after we have every earthly reason to abandon it.

I have come to believe that learning to love the one who is hardest to love — to love as Christ loves — is among the most stringent tests of faith we will ever face. It is easy to love those who love us; even those far from God manage that much (Matthew 5:46–47). The distinctly Christian thing, the thing that marks us as truly belonging to our Father, is to love where love is not returned, and to keep loving where love has been betrayed.

We live in a world where betrayal is common and trust is scarce. But as God's called-out ones, members of the household of faith, we are not called to live as the world lives. We are called to live as Christ lived. **And if the Lord Jesus could love even Judas, then through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can love the one who is hard to love.**

Because the true test of the Christian faith was never how well we love Jesus when everything feels good. It is how well we love *like* Jesus when it hurts.

Ten Questions for Honest Self-Examination

Before turning the last page, sit quietly with these questions. Some will speak to how you have been wounded; others to how you may have wounded. Both directions matter, for the same grace that calls us to forgive our betrayers also calls us to seek the forgiveness of those we have failed.

1 Whom am I still refusing to forgive?

Is there a name that rises in me with a familiar heat whenever it is mentioned? Have I truly released that debt before God, or have I only buried it where it can go on quietly poisoning me?

2 Has a betrayal hardened me toward everyone?

Have I let one person's failure, or a few, convince me that all people are threats? Am I living behind walls that keep out not only danger, but love itself?

3 Am I confusing forgiveness with the rebuilding of trust?

Have I told myself I cannot forgive because I cannot yet trust? Am I willing to release the debt now, even while wisely allowing trust to be rebuilt only over time and on evidence?

4 How do I speak of those who have wronged me?

When their names come up, does venom or grace come out of my mouth? What does the way I talk about them reveal about the true state of my heart?

5 Have I been someone else's Judas?

Setting aside my own wounds for a moment: is there someone I have betrayed, abandoned, or failed — someone to whom I owe honest repentance and, if possible, the seeking of their forgiveness?

6 Am I praying for the one who hurt me?

Not a bitter prayer for their comeuppance, but a genuine prayer for their good. If I cannot yet pray it sincerely, am I willing to ask God to make me willing?

7 Am I guarding my heart, or hardening it?

There is a world of difference between the two. Have I set wise boundaries out of prudence, or built cold walls out of unforgiveness dressed up as self-protection?

8 Am I entrusting justice to God?

Am I still trying to be judge, jury, and executioner in a case God has asked me to hand over to Him? What would it cost me to lay the scales down?

9 Is my wound becoming wisdom or cynicism?

Am I letting the experience make me more discerning and compassionate, or only more suspicious and cold? Which of those two is actually growing in me?

10 Am I still able to receive love?

Have I so guarded myself that I can no longer let anyone in? Am I willing, by grace, to risk being loved again — to keep the door of my heart unbolted, even knowing the cost?

A Final Word

Before Judas ever lifted the betraying kiss, the Lord had already knelt and washed his feet.

Before the soldiers drove in the nails, Christ had already chosen the words He would pray over them.

Before Joseph's brothers ever bowed before him in Egypt, he had already wept and forgiven them in his heart.

Before David ever wept over the king who had hunted him, he had already laid down the spear he was entitled to throw.

Betrayal is one of the deepest wounds a human being can suffer, and Scripture never pretends otherwise. But in the economy of God, a wound is never only a wound. It is also an invitation — to a love higher than our instincts, deeper than our injuries, and stronger than the bitterness that would otherwise claim us. It is the place where we discover whether the love of Christ has merely been admired in us or has actually taken root.

To love the one who wounded us is not to excuse what they did. It is to refuse to let them make us into something smaller, colder, and less like our Lord than we were before they wounded us. It is to hand the wound to God and to let Him do with it what only He can do: turn what was meant for evil into something that, in the end, works for good.

If you have been deeply hurt by someone close, the road back to a heart that can love again is real, and it is open. It does not run through pretending, and it does not run through vengeance. It runs, as every road in the Christian life finally does, straight through the cross — where the most betrayed Man who ever lived looked at those who had failed Him and chose, even then, to love.

“ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

— Romans 12:21 NKJV