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CHAPTER ONE

Grace like
Sweeping

The greatest marriages are built on teamwork. A mutual respect, a healthy dose of admiration, and a never-ending portion of love and grace.

—FAWN WEAVER

I'M NOT BIG ON sports. Yeah, I know that seems a bit ironic coming from the author of a book called *Team Us*, but there you have it. The fact is, I'm fairly clueless when it comes to America's favorite athletic pastimes. Sure, I can name my current hometown's major league baseball team, the Braves, but if you start asking me about football teams, I'd need the help of Google.

Luckily for me, I married a man who isn't all that into sports either. Sometimes Ted wishes he were, but if given the choice he'd much rather watch a political analysis of the president's latest speech on Fox News than instant replays on ESPN. While some couples have power struggles over

20 whether to watch HGTV or Monday Night Football, our quibbles face off kitchen remodels against breaking news.

We aren't total killjoys in the realm of sports. We feel the electricity when Olympic season rolls around. I do pull out my "Go USA!" spirit for figure skating during the winter games. Ted finds the modern pentathlon in the summer games intriguing, largely because a friend of ours competed in recent years. Yet, if we miss watching them when they air, I can't say we're all that disappointed. Life goes on pretty much the same either way.

But something unexpected happened the last time the Winter Olympics made its way to our TV. We got hooked. As in DVR-recording, disappointment-when-we-missed-a-competition type hooked. It wasn't what you'd think, though. We weren't addicted to ice skating, freestyle skiing, or even bobsledding, but on curling. You know, that sport you'd expect to find on the decks of an ocean liner somewhere because it looks a lot like shuffleboard. Except, well, it's played on ice.

It happened one Saturday afternoon as I randomly flipped through the channels. I'm pretty sure I was looking for the pairs figure skating competition. I didn't find skating, but I did stumble upon a sport I'd never seen before. A game that included . . . wait, were those brooms? In the Olympics? Really?

I'm not sure why I kept watching, but I did. It wasn't like this sport was all that exciting at first glance. Honestly, it seemed to have the entertainment value of C-SPAN. For some reason, though, the longer I watched, the harder it was to stop. Soon Ted joined me. Before long, I'd even pulled up Wikipedia on our laptop to learn more about this broom-inclusive sport.

Nicknamed "chess on ice," curling requires strategy, precision, and excellent teamwork. If you don't know how the

game works, here are the basics from my research via Wikipedia (I also possibly spent a few hours perusing *Curling for Dummies online*¹).

A game of curling is made up of two teams with four members each. The players take turns skillfully sliding a granite stone across the ice, also known as the “curling sheet,” toward a large circular target called the “house.” The team to get the most stones in the house’s center or closest to it wins. As you’d expect from a game likened to chess, there are a number of complicated rules and plays. But as I said, basics.

What makes curling interesting is that it’s not like bowling. It isn’t a game where once you’ve done your best to calculate your ball’s trajectory and sent it off, it’s gone. You know, the kind where if it starts to veer for the gutter, you’re out of luck. Nope, curling has this wonderful thing called “sweepers.” After the stone is slid, two team members, or “sweepers,” skate alongside it, using the sweeping motion of their brooms to make sure the “rock,” as we North Americans like to call it, doesn’t deviate from its set path.

I’m telling you, if you’ve never watched a game of curling, it really is fascinating once you understand all the strategy that’s at play. Search for it on YouTube. You’ll thank me.

What makes it even more intriguing for me, though, is it reminds me of marriage. You see, just like curling, marriage is a team effort that can thrive when approached with strategy, intentionality, and lots of sweeping. At least I’ve found this to be true in my own marriage.

The War Room Picnic

I still remember one of Ted’s and my first real dates, although I admit being a mom of young children has blurred the details a bit. Like, did we eat Reubens on our May picnic? Or perhaps it was turkey and cheese? I can bet that Ted

- 22 doesn't remember either. If it happened more than five years ago and wasn't life-changing, he tends to forget.

I imagine some wives would find such a memory-loss quirk maddening. Ashleigh has come to see it as part of who I am, though. It's something that's at times a disappointment (when I forget her birthday) and at times a blessing (when I forget an argument). Accepting my imperfect memory helps us avoid conflict in those times when my forgetfulness is untimely.

Ted says

Regardless of whether our bread was rye or wheat, what I do know is that we didn't just bring lunch to the park that day. We also packed a few pieces of scrap paper and two pens. While some couples may have used that beautiful spring afternoon to gaze adoringly into each other's eyes, as they ever-so-discreetly checked their teeth for stray food, we decided to make a list. Sure, it sounds boring—well, maybe not to all you fellow Type-A personalities out there—but looking back, it was perhaps one of the wisest ways we could kick off our relationship.

You see, this wasn't a bucket list of our must-dos. We weren't scribbling down things like "Take a walk in the botanical gardens" and "Eat crème brulee in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower," although we did go on to do both. Nope, we were strategizing. The picnic table that day became our war room.

We jotted down a list of qualities we wanted to see characterize our relationship. At that point in time, we didn't know whether we'd go on to marry each other, but what we did know was that regardless of the result, we wanted to look

back at our time together and know we did our best to walk out our relationship in a way that honored God and each other.

We scribbled things like friendship, purity, and good communication. It may sound like we were writing a prescription for our relationship or dictating a set of rules, but we weren't. What we were doing was creating a map of the way we wanted to see our interactions develop and play out. We'd both been in previous dating relationships; Ted had even been engaged twice. We'd learned a lot from our mistakes, and neither of us was eager to repeat them.

I think it's safe to say that every team, whether it's in curling or marriage, does better with strategy and intentionality. They take a team far. Yet these things alone don't bring home the gold. Ted and I have found that sweeping is crucial.

Sweeping Matters

While strategy and intentionality set our marriage on a good path, they aren't what's kept us going when we've struggled with each other's selfish habits. Or when we've faced conflict. They're not what's brought us through job loss and a miscarriage and different parenting styles.

Nope, it's been grace.

Grace is to marriage what sweepers are to curling (I know, I sound a bit like the Sphinx from the 1999 film *Mystery Men*). Just like the two sweepers' primary job is to ensure the rock follows its projected trajectory as closely as possible, grace helps marriage stay on that heavenward "until death do us part" course.

I'm sure you're familiar with the term *grace*. It's one we throw around fairly often and sometimes rather casually in our Christian circles. It's the name of our churches, the short prayers we utter before meals, and, for me, the middle name of our oldest daughter. I think many of us, including me at

24 times, have come to view grace in the context of our spiritual lives, as we do cheddar cheese to a cheeseburger: necessary, but not as exciting as a good slice of Gruyère. It's much more interesting to focus on what God's calling is on our lives or our top three spiritual gifts.

While there's nothing wrong with concerning ourselves with these things, it's important not to brush over grace. This "disposition to or an act or instance of kindness, courtesy, or clemency"² is foundational to our salvation. Therefore, I think it should be foundational to our marriages.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9).

I love that passage. It reminds me that God's grace is free. It's a gift. It's not dependent on how many hours I volunteered at hospice while in high school or how consistently I show up on Sunday mornings. Yes, I certainly want to honor God with my attitudes and actions, just as Ted and I wanted to in our dating relationship, but I don't have to bring home first place in the category of good works in order to snag this prize.

When I grasp this truth that God's grace—His kindness and clemency—has been given to me, it should make a big difference in my relationships with others, specifically with Ted. And it has. While I don't think we wrote grace down on our list that day at the park, somewhere along the way we determined it was important. We decided that we wouldn't withhold it from one another or force the other to earn it. We'd give it freely to each other, just as we'd received it from the Lord.

Does our practice of grace mean that anything goes in our marriage? Do we just turn a blind eye to each other's

sins? Not at all. Although, as I'll mention later, it has taken some growth on my part to directly address it. 25

But when Ted and I do address it, especially the small stuff, we also embrace the wisdom of 1 Peter that says, "Love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). We attempt to do what R. C. Sproul Jr. points to as the core meaning of this verse. We "under-accuse, over-repent and over-forgive."³ We're not afraid to call sin by its name, but we're also quick "to forgive it and to look past it."⁴

Ted says

I love how Dr. Sproul Jr. explores this verse: "When we are wronged, our calling is to practice a careful moral calculus. Is this offense one I should let go of?" he asks. "Or is this offense grievous enough that love means confronting in grace my brother?"⁵ Ashleigh and I have found that most of our "sins" toward each other fit in that first, love-covering category. And it's good that we just let them go.

I'm reminded of what nineteenth-century theologian Charles Spurgeon once said:

He who grows in grace remembers that he is but dust, and he therefore does not expect his fellow Christians to be anything more. He overlooks ten thousand of their faults, because he knows his God overlooks twenty thousand in his own case. He does not expect perfection in the creature, and, therefore, he is not disappointed when he does not find it.⁶

The reality is that deciding and doing aren't the same thing. Just because Ted and I determined to extend grace doesn't make it easy. Sometimes we'd much rather pick a fight with each other than extend kindness. Sometimes that's

- 26 exactly what we do. Neither one of us is naturally inclined to respond to everything with grace, especially when it falls into the category of irritating or just plain maddening. That doesn't mean we stop trying, though.

The Game Plan

So what's been Ted's and my game plan for living out grace in the minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour of daily life? Especially on those days when picking a fight takes a lot less effort?

As you'll read throughout this book, there are lots of ways we've put grace to work in our marriage. Believe me, we don't just let it lie around. There's one thing, though, that serves as a starting point for everything else. And that is our determination to focus on the best, not the worst, in each other.

Think back to those Olympic curling teams. Yep, they're masters at strategy, precision, and sweeping. They have to be to make it to "the Games." But something else influences how well they execute a game, and that's team unity. When they step out on that ice, they need to work together.

Whether it's in curling or marriage, unity flourishes when members of a team focus on and play to each other's strengths, not weaknesses. Our friends George and Julie have found this to be true in their marriage. George shared:

I'm a clean freak. Julie's . . . well, *not* a clean freak. She won't be starring on *Hoarders* any time soon, but she just doesn't see a problem with piles of papers on her desk and a little clutter in the living room. That stuff drives me nuts; so a number of our first fights were about messiness. Even now, I get dirty looks when I suggest relocating piles of papers to the recycle bin.

In our initial years of wedded bliss, here's how the fight usually went. I'd get stressed about other things (like work), so my patience would get shorter than usual. (And to be honest, patience is not one of my selling points on a good day.) I'd notice a fresh stack of debris in the house, and make a few delicate, subtle suggestions about what to do with it (or maybe where to shove it). Julie would roll her eyes, then say she'd deal with it "tomorrow."

A few days later, when the pile was still there and I was stressed again, I'd get on her case for not keeping her promise about "tomorrow." Julie's eyes would narrow as she reminded me how busy she was with grad school. My tone would turn sarcastic as I reminded *her* that she'd watched three episodes of reality TV last night. Before you knew it, the cheerful sounds of shouting and door-slamming would ring through the household.

Slowly, I think we both realized that fighting over messes was . . . how should I put it? . . . *really stupid*. Messes still drive me nuts, and Julie still makes 'em, but when she leaves a pile of clothes on her side of the bed, I try to look the other way. She has plenty of good qualities (like loving me, for instance) that make up for dirty laundry. If she misses her self-imposed deadline to clean things up, I try to remind myself she had good intentions, even when the follow-through is lacking.

When I gripe about a debris pile, she does her best to remember that although I'm an irritating neat freak, there are a couple reasons why she agreed to marry me anyway. So she'll often put in some time on the cleanup, even if the mess never attains my standards of antisepsis.

We still have “discussions” over messes, but blowups have become rare. Most of the time, we get through it with a few rolled eyes and a little understanding. There are enough good things in our marriage that I can deal with a stack of random CDs heaped in the living room—even the one I’m staring at as I type this paragraph on my laptop. Julie’s a talented worship musician, and talented musicians need lots of CDs. I’ll try to remember that later today when I drop subtle hints for her to sort them onto shelves . . .

Poised for the Best

For Ted and me, focusing on the positive doesn’t just include keeping the other’s strengths front and center. I doubt it stops there for George and Julie either. It means that we also choose to assume the best of the other’s motives and actions.

This idea of assuming the best comes from 1 Corinthians 13, that famous New Testament chapter on love. Odds are, you had it read at your wedding. In this passage, the Amplified Bible says that love “is ever ready to believe the best of every person” (1 Corinthians 13:7). Did you get that? “Ever ready,” as in always poised.

This section of Scripture is more than just nice prose read during one’s nuptials. I’ve found that when it comes to extinguishing “fires” set off by things like knee-jerk reactions, there’s nothing like it. Ted and I keep it handy for such occasions.

Okay, maybe I should clarify that a bit: I’m mostly the one who keeps it handy. You see, while grace may not come naturally to either Ted or me 24/7, when it’s time to assume the best, Ted seems to make it look effortless.

I'd love to claim it's because I make it a cinch for him. That I'm like Mary Poppins: "practically perfect in every way." Let's all get a good laugh out of that now because it couldn't be more untrue. It just seems to be part of Ted's last-born, easy-going personality. He doesn't read too much into what others say. He tends to take them at face-value and is quick to offer the benefit of the doubt. It's a beauty he's brought to our marriage.

Ted says

This is a good time to reread the Spurgeon quote from a few pages back. As "sinners," both Ashleigh and I have kind of come to expect imperfection from each other. Yeah, that's romantic. The thing is, we consequently expect that we'll need to extend grace in response to the other's imperfection. And we've come to appreciate that we're more than likely to receive it as well.

I've had to work harder, especially when we first started out. My default was to jump to conclusions, and not positive ones at that. Over a decade later, I'm still learning from an early opportunity I had to assume the best of Ted.

Remember that war room meeting in the park? About two months later, Ted and I found that item #3 on our list, that would be "good communication," wasn't going to be as easy to accomplish as we'd first assumed.

It all started when Ted disappeared. Yep, for about three days.

Okay, so he didn't actually disappear, as in his location was a mystery. I knew exactly where he was, he just wasn't available. At least not to me. Instead of us taking random walks through the woods or eating dinner at our favorite Mexican dive, he was holed up in his home studio making

30 last-minute edits to a CD our church was producing. Not only had he lent his synth and piano playing skills to the project, but he also served as one of the engineers. It was down to the wire, and Ted had taken vacation time off to make the final tweaks.

The problem was, I think he forgot he owned a car or a phone or an email account during that time. If he remembered he had them, he certainly wasn't using them to get in touch with me.

What was I left to think? Well, there were two options. One, I could assume that Ted was intensely focused on finishing this project and not purposely ignoring me. Two, I could take it personally.

Being the mature woman that I was, I took it personally. I started to wonder if maybe Ted had forgotten he had a girlfriend and perhaps even come to prefer his life minus me.

By day three, I'd had enough.

"Fine, he won't return my calls," I thought. "I'll just show up at his condo." So I did. At that point, even my dislike for conflict—which you'll learn more about later—couldn't keep me from his doorstep.

Do you know what happened? He was happy to see me. I was relieved but surprised all the same.

After all, I'd jumped to all kinds of conclusions. I'd assumed that he was reevaluating our relationship. I'd told myself that maybe he'd decided he really didn't like me all that much. Turns out none of those things were true. As I'd come to learn better over the years, when Ted is working on a project, he immerses himself in it, giving it 100 percent of his attention. He's not one to multitask well.

A walk around the block did a lot to clear this up. I went home that evening realizing the importance of not jumping to conclusions. Ted came to see that no matter how focused he was, it's never a good idea to give me three days of silence. We were one step closer to making good on item #3 on our list.

If curling has taught me anything, it's this. One, J. K. Rowling wasn't the first person to invent a sport that uses brooms. Two, and far more importantly, being a team takes work. Whether it's on the ice or in marriage, teamwork requires strategy, intentionality, sweeping, and unity. It's not always easy to stay on that heavenward, "till death do us part" trajectory. The thing is, not only is it doable, it's worth the effort. 31

Us Time

Now it's your turn. Grab these questions, find a spot where you and your spouse love to chat, and create your own war room.

1. If you were to compare marriage to any sport, what would it be and why? Share with each other your own sports analogies and insights. Be silly but also find a moment to think seriously about this.
2. What are two or three ways you're intentional in your marriage? Whether it's setting aside time to talk about your day or scheduling a weekly date night, affirm a few specific things that you do well. Now brainstorm a few ways you can do better.
3. What does grace look like in your marriage? How do you practice it? Discuss a time this week when you could have offered grace, but didn't. What is a specific way you can do better next time?
4. Like George, is there something trivial that you let disrupt unity in your marriage? Discuss a recent "blowup" and how it could have been avoided.
5. Are you poised to assume the best of each other? What types of situations result in knee-jerk reactions from you? What can you do to change this?