**Malcolm Gladwell Module**

**Reading**

Malcolm Gladwell, “The Roseto Mystery,” in Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), 3-11. Included, with permission, in Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass (eds.), *Leading Lives that Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be*, second edition (Eerdmans, 2020), 338-43.

**About the Author**

Malcolm Timothy Gladwell is a Canadian journalist, author, and public speaker. He was born in the UK in 1963 and moved to Canada shortly thereafter, where he has remained ever since. After years of freelance writing for a number of smaller newspapers and magazines, he accepted a position at the *Washington Post* where he worked for several years before becoming a staff writer for the *New Yorker* in 1996. He also hosts a popular podcast, “Revisionist History.”

He is best known for his five *New York Times* best-sellers: *The Tipping Point* (2000), *Blink (2005), Outliers* (2008), *What the Dog Saw* (2009) *, and David and Goliath* (2013). His most recent book is *Talking to Strangers* (2019)*.* Gladwell’s essays and books often deal with the unexpected implications of research in the social sciences. Drawing extensively on new academic work, particularly in the areas of sociology, psychology, and economics, he shows how such understandings affect matters of everyday life. And he does so by telling a good story.

Gladwell is admired for his imaginative versatility as a thinker, a writer, and a social observer. Starting with relatively unknown places like Roseto, or subjects that most others would deem unworthy of serious treatment, he then proceeds to write about them in a way that reveals vitally important truths about the human condition and contemporary culture more generally. For example, in 2001 he won the National Magazine Award for his *New Yorker* profile of Ron Popeil, “The Pitchman.” Remember the “Ron Popeil pocket fisherman” (a telescoped rod with attached reel that you could carry in your pocket in case you suddenly happened upon a promising trout stream) and many other strange but seemingly necessary devices that Ron promoted for years on TV?

**Commentary**

However much the United States has changed over the years, we have remained stubbornly individualistic in our thinking and acting. Thus, though we know very well that congregations are communities of people who are called both collectively and individually, we invariably focus upon individual people when we think about callings or vocations.

By contrast to this common intellectual tendency, our theologians, philosophers, novelists, and social scientists insist that we human beings are fundamentally and intrinsically social creatures, “dependent rational animals,” as one philosopher has put it. We depend for our identities and our flourishing on others in our midst. The language we use to think and speak is itself socially constructed.

“The Roseto Mystery” uncovers yet another important dimension of our need for community. Most of us would readily acknowledge that we are mutually dependent upon one another for our spiritual or our psychological or our economic wellbeing. But for our physical wellbeing? Is hyper-individualism unhealthy? That is one of the mysteries that the little town of Roseto might help us solve.

**Discussion Questions**

When you first read the description of Roseto and a bit about its history, you might well have thought you were reading a short story. But soon it turned into a medical mystery and a social-scientific investigation. What did you initially think might have accounted for the exceptional health of the citizens of Roseto? Are you convinced by the solution to the Roseto mystery? Why or why not?

How important was Father Pasquale de Nisco in creating the community that became Roseto? Were his initiatives “religious” in a narrow sense of the word? Does your congregation sponsor projects or programs or other initiatives that build up the health of the community that surrounds the church? What are some examples?

At the present time, life expectancy in Roseto does not differ appreciably from life expectancy in other small towns of the same sort. As soon as Roseto became incorporated into the larger region economically and socially, as soon as it became more “modern” in its life style, and as soon as it began to experience the cultural pressures that often separate people from one another, the health of its population deteriorated. Is there anything that local congregations can do to retard such deterioration among their members? If so, what?

Gladwell describes many of the everyday interactions among the citizens of Roseto. Do these interactions share a common character or tone or level on intensity? What exactly do they have in common? Think of the many gatherings your congregation hosts and encourages. What do they have in common? Do they add to the hectic pace and anxiety-inducing character of contemporary life or do they minister to and even heal those stresses?

Increasing numbers of congregations have a “parish nurse.” To what extent should congregations assume, as part of their calling, responsibility for the *physical* health of their members? What Biblical or theological warrants are there for undertaking such responsibility?

Do you think that individualism is consistent with a Christian way of life? Why or why not?