Hi,

Today’s updates:

* My 11am Sunday class will be week 5 of the series, *The New Testament in Seven Sentences*. We will be talking about covenants. The class will meet on [my personal Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/scottengle).
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.
* I’ve been told that my YouTube page/channel can be hard to find. A simple solution would be to [go to the link (here)](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChtwqaUcpZbwyTWnkp6INwQ?view_as=subscriber) and then bookmark the page or subscribe to my channel.

Today, we are going to focus on the hope that lies in our relationships with people, with a beautiful rendering by Eugene Peterson of a well-known passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans.

**Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (NRSV)**

**Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.**

**Romans 12:9-18 (The Message)**

**Love from the center of who you are; don’t fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.**

**Don’t burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don’t quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.**

**Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they’re happy; share tears when they’re down. Get along with each other; don’t be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don’t be the great somebody.**

**Don’t hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you’ve got it in you, get along with everybody.**

The truth is that for me and many men, relationships are not always at the top of our list, no matter how much we profess that we love God and neighbor. In his book, *Chazown*, Craig Groeschel admits that “for years, I didn’t see the value of intentionally developing godly relationships. That was my wife’s department, so I left the relational ball in her court. Content with following along, I struggled relationally, not seeing the value of investing in and receiving from them.” Sounds a lot like me and other men I know. We know with our heads and even our hearts that we proclaim a relational God who desires love from us before all else – love for God and love of others. But when it comes to the real work of relationships, too many men back off, unsure of how to proceed and even unwilling.

*What love looks like*

Opening with a telling “therefore,” Romans 12 marks a turn in Paul’s letter. But it is not the turn people often think is taken. Some contrast Paul’s “theology” (Chapters 1-11) with his “ethics” (Chapters 12-16), perhaps describing it as “belief” and “practice.” But this does Paul a disservice. There can be no such separation for Paul or for us. What we “believe” and what we “do” are woven together and cannot be pulled apart. Both the intellectually-minded and the ever-practical find it more comfortable to put belief and practice in two separate boxes, but, as N.T. Wright aptly notes, it is like trying to separate our blood and our breath.

Romans 1-11 takes us up a mountain, showing us that God’s faithfulness to the covenant made with Abraham and the Israelites has been brought to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. And with Jesus’ arrival nothing can ever be the same. Creation and humanity have been remade, even as we await this re-creation’s final consummation.

In Romans 12, Paul begins to show us, concretely, what this re-creation looks like. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may see clearly what is “good and acceptable and perfect,” so that we can imaginatively comprehend and embrace the will of God (12:2). This renewing does not take place in isolation, but in relationship within community. Our reshaping plays out differently from person to person, but all of it is given to us for the building up of the community (12:3-8).

And what does this renewing look like? It looks like love. And what does love look like? Love is genuine, coming from the center of ourselves; it can’t be faked. Love is sacrificial. It is mutual. It is being willing to play second fiddle. Love is taking care of those who need us or are simply in need. We laugh with our friends when they laugh and we cry with them when they mourn. Read Romans 12:9-18 again. Read it in different translations. Try reading it less as a series of exhortations and more as a description, an imaginative description of the renewed mind living with others, including even those who are hostile to us or to the Gospel of Christ.

It is always worth remembering that the NT word for love is nearly always the Greek, *agape*. In Greek usage, it was a colorless, empty word, waiting to be filled with meaning and Paul doesn’t hesitate to fill it right up. All understandings of love that exclude God are mere distortions of the real thing. Thus, Paul tells the Christians in Rome that they are to love but then has to tell them exactly what genuine God-given love looks like, so that they can despise what is evil and hold on to what is good (12:9).

All this takes more imagination than we think. The world wants to teach us about love, to conform us to its ways. In the memorable words of J.B. Phillips, the world wants to squeeze us into its mold. So we must train ourselves to recognize the face of Christian love.

*A lengthy bit more -- What gives with Ecclesiastes?*

If you’ve read Ecclesiastes, you might be asking yourself what a passage from it is doing in a series about finding purpose. Indeed, you don’t have to read much of Ecclesiastes before you find yourself asking how this book made it into the Bible at all!

At first glance, Ecclesiastes seems to endorse a despairing view of life and creation. In the opening phrases, we are introduced to the Teacher’s teaching: “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” The Hebrew word that the NRSV translates as “vanity” is *hebel*, which literally means breath or vapor. The NRSV retains the archaic word “vanity” because of its long tradition in English literature. Here, the word means something close to “meaninglessness” and that is how the NIV renders it.

Yet, by painting vivid pictures of a purposeless, godless life, Ecclesiastes points us toward the futility of any life not grounded in God and even the futility of all life if there is no god.

There seem to be as many approaches to Ecclesiastes as there are commentators, so don’t be surprised if you find it challenging. One way to see the book’s structure is to compare it to Job. In Job, there are the introductory scenes, followed by the long (and fruitless!) speeches by Job and his friends, followed by the arrival of God and the restoration of Job’s fortunes. Ecclesiastes opens with a short prologue where the narrator tells of the Teacher’s sayings (1:1 — 1:11). Then there are 11 or so chapters where the Teacher speaks for himself (also fruitlessly!). At the end of the book, our narrator returns and offers us some perspective (God’s perspective!) on the Teacher’s philosophy. (12:9-14)

In *A Survey of the Old Testament*, Andrew Hill & John Walton suggest that there are four main themes in Ecclesiastes:

* We should not expect life to be self-fulfilling.
* Our frustrations in life are unavoidable.
* We must accept the seasons of life.
* We can enjoy life only through a God-centered world-view.

Many Old Testament writers paint pictures for us, calling us to look for the truths behind the picture. For example, Micah 4:1-8 is a picture of God’s kingdom. I tend to see Ecclesiastes as a picture of a life lived without God. It is a bleak picture that pulls no punches. If there is no God or if we choose to live as if there is no God, then life *is* “meaningless,” and we might as well “eat, drink, and be merry.” There are a few brighter moments in the book, but they only lure one back into the Teacher’s world of the absurd, back into his efforts to make his way through his meaningless life. Actually, if you believe your life has no purpose or meaning, his advice is pretty good!

Ecclesiastes testifies to Israel’s willingness to confront the hard realities of life, the sense of purposelessness and drift that afflict us all from time to time. Israel saw that for mature, caring adults, life is really not very simple and it is not a life of endless victories. The ordinary experiences of life test our faith. Still, as the narrator tells us at the end of the book—when all has been said and all the absurdities of life confronted, we are called to our duty: “Fear God and keep his commandments” (12:13).

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott