

the MOCKINGBIRD
PARABLES

Transforming Lives through
the Power of Story

Matt Litton



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*In loving memory of
Rachel Brooke Litton
(1977–2004)*



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To Kill a Mockingbird
and the Power of Parables

*The destiny of the world is determined
less by the battles that are lost and won
than by the stories it loves and believes in.*

—HAROLD C. GODDARD (1878–1950),
FROM *THE MEANING OF SHAKESPEARE, VOLUME 2*

*Our vocation is not to give visibility
to our powers but to God's compassion.*

—HENRI NOUWEN (1932–1996), FROM
COMPASSION: A REFLECTION ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

The opening lines of the novel are so familiar now, but I can still remember the first time they were read to me:

When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow . . .

It seems that I was nearly thirteen myself, huddled uncomfortably in the backseat of the family station wagon with my brother and sister, listening intently as the sun burned down on the windshield mural of red clay, bright chrome bumpers, and the green exit signs of that big American highway careening by.

When it healed, and Jem's fears of never being able to play football were assuaged . . .

The three of us leaned toward the front passenger seat, crowded and awkward, like turtles stretching our necks, straining to hear over the rhythmic drone of rubber sailing on the hot Georgia asphalt . . .

It began the summer Dill came to us, when Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out . . .

Our mother, an English teacher, delivered the beautiful compilation of Americana and grace that is *To Kill a Mockingbird* with splendid drama and nuance, as if the car were her classroom that long vacation drive to the beach.

And as is the case with all of the finest novels, every character seemed familiar, every street seemed a real street, every building like someplace I had seen before. Although there was much I did not understand about the story on that first read, every word seemed authentic, palpable, and deeply affecting. I was moved by the courage of the protagonists, stunned by the childlike honesty of Scout Finch, horrified by the evil hidden in the hearts of even the good churchgoing folks, and devastated by the injustice done to Tom Robinson. Although I could never have articulated it at the time, I was introduced to both the beauty and the sickness that resides in the heart of humanity. It was genuine, candid, and so truly an American story. Only with maturity did I begin to appreciate the power of the novel's delicate blend of nostalgia and humor, conveyed with such charm and subtlety that I couldn't help but be disarmed. Only then, with all my defenses down, did I realize that I was being gently forced to look in a mirror to examine my own life and community, and unequivocally take note of the beauty, the blemishes—and the pressing need for change.

In the many years since that vacation, I have turned to the pages of *To Kill a Mockingbird* countless times, often still hearing my mother's voice and feeling like that thirteen-year-old kid, watching the windows full of huge clouds surfing over the heat and busyness of the southern highways. Yet with each visit to Maycomb, Alabama, I find there is more exploration needed, more to the characters I thought I knew. Like millions of other readers, I have fallen in love with the novel, and for many years have made an annual summer pilgrimage to Maycomb through

the pages of Harper Lee's classic, each time finding something fresh and remarkable.

It is a unique novel because of its continued relevance to readers. At the time of the book's publication in 1960 (and the subsequent release of the Academy Award-winning movie), it rattled the establishment with its forthright and severe criticism of racism, and doubtless opened the eyes of average Americans, pushing the nation toward true civil rights for all its citizens. In fact, I believe it stands today, revered and often quoted, as a beacon pointing the way toward our continued pursuit for equality in the world. The novel has been described simply as the story of one man's stand for racial justice, but we cannot ignore the many other valuable themes and lessons found in its pages.

As witness to its continued importance, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was chosen most by British librarians as a book all adults should read before they die, and it was named the best novel of the twentieth century by American librarians. It seems to remain perpetually enshrined at the top of the lists of most discussed novels on numerous literary Web sites. The story's role as a staple in the education of millions of school-age children across the world also cannot be underestimated. It is our nation's most widely read novel in grades nine through twelve. It is a piece of literature that stands animate in its interminable relevance, and is a book I can truly say I will never grow tired of reading.

Whenever I find myself reflecting on its significance, I am always struck with wonder at the legend that Harper Lee became so frustrated with writing *To Kill a Mockingbird* that she simply

tossed the entire manuscript out of her New York City apartment window . . . where it could have been lost forever down sewer grates, under the feet of passersby, blown to the windshields of fleeting cabs. But as the story is told, an encouraging phone call from an editor just moments later sent her to the sidewalk to recover the abandoned work.

I have always taught my students that the best novels will allow us to look at life through different-colored lenses, to observe the world from different perspectives. I begin by asking them to imagine putting on a pair of glasses when they open a work of literature. I endeavor to help them understand they will bring their own shades and perspectives to the reading, and that the colors of those lenses will affect the way they interpret the meanings of stories. I often think of the scene from the movie *Dead Poets Society* in which master instructor John Keating has his students come to the front of the room to stand on his desk and see the classroom from a different vantage point, announcing, “I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way.”¹ I tell my students that through life experiences, friendships, education, and maturity, their worldview will continue to change.

And yet while they will always bring their own perspective to the literature we study, I tell them they should also be willing to try to observe the world through the author’s eyes. Reading is a partnership between reader and writer; readers are always participants in the story on some level. An easy example that comes to mind involves a wonderful poem by e. e. cummings titled “i carry your

heart with me.” The poem will certainly represent something completely different to someone who has been married for thirty years than it might to a newlywed couple. Or think about John 3:16 (NIV) for a moment: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . .” Those words evoke a much deeper and more personal meaning to me now that I am a father than they did when I was merely a college student. Consider how much more heavily those words might fall on the ears of a father or mother who has experienced the loss of a child.

So it is with my own perspective that I offer these parables drawn from a book I love so well. Swiss theologian Karl Barth’s writing first pointed me toward the truth that there is an aliveness to the Scripture, that we are not to simply read the biblical narrative, but to experience it. Bernhard Anderson elaborates on this concept when he suggests that we “read it [the Bible] as a story that is not just about other people of long ago but that is about us in the places where we are living.”² I have always approached *To Kill a Mockingbird* (and many other novels) in this same way, wearing lenses of faith, and so my reading of the novel has always been a spiritual one. It is very important to understand, especially for those who will critique this work, that it is not my intent to speak for Harper Lee. Rather, through this collection of stories, I want to share with you how powerfully *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s moral and spiritual lessons have spoken to me.

My interpretation of the book has changed through the seasons of my life. During college, I was inspired by Lee’s main character, Atticus, a steadfast, uncompromising hero who is

admired as a man who truly lives out the principles of his faith. I was mesmerized by his courage and eloquence, and I focused mainly on his heroism and compassion, understanding it as a call to make a difference in the world. It was the trailhead of a path that would lead me into education, and eventually into writing.

Later I studied theology, and I began to notice a distinct difference in the way the *Mockingbird* heroes and heroines conducted themselves; you could say I was impressed at what Lee's protagonists *didn't* do. In a world that celebrates power, in which to be heard you need the loudest voice, and where the most forceful affirmations are generally considered "right," these special characters challenged me with their adherence to a different set of rules and beliefs. In Maycomb, the truth was told by children, and justice and courage were disciplines practiced not with guns, legislation, or propaganda, but by characters who peacefully and courageously denied themselves out of true compassion for others. I began to wonder if these characters operated cognizant of an alternative, more eternal reality—one far superior to the oppressive power systems under which they lived. These characters, with all their shortcomings, seemed to model the teachings and walk in the footsteps of faith. I developed a deep admiration and longing to practice this type of heroism in my own life.

As I began to read the novel through the lenses of fatherhood, I once again turned to Atticus Finch in awe of his patience and wisdom with his children. As a father of four, I often find myself asking how Atticus might handle the children if he were riding along with

us on our eighteen-hour car ride to the beach. I often (unsuccessfully) try to place myself in his shoes. Forget parenting gurus like Dr. Spock or Dr. Dobson—Atticus Finch is my model for parenting.

One reading of the novel was particularly difficult for me. On a hectic evening in July several years ago, my wife and I received a dreadful phone call: my sister and her unborn child had suddenly passed away. Months later, I remember opening that old, worn mass-market copy of *Mockingbird* in the grief-induced haze of that heartbreaking loss, and the words sent tears streaming down my cheeks. You see, my little sister was very much our family's Scout Finch; she lived her life undeterred by other people's expectations of her. It is hard, sometimes, to read Scout's words without hearing my sister's voice and recalling how vibrantly, compassionately, and fearlessly she lived her life. I strive to live with the same type of passion.

My most recent explorations of the novel have been the most important, because I have come to perceive the spiritual significance *To Kill a Mockingbird* can hold for people of faith. Maybe it was Harper Lee's own words in her 1961 essay, in which she described love as "manifestations of a power within us that must of necessity be called divine, for it is no invention of man."³ Maybe it was Atticus's explanation to his daughter, Scout, about why he had to take the Tom Robinson case: because he wouldn't feel right going to church to worship God if he didn't. Or quite possibly it was the eloquence of Eugene Peterson's admonitions about "words that God's Spirit . . . uses to breathe life into our souls."⁴

Over the past few years I have come to ascertain something very spiritual about the themes veiled in the pages of this deeply familiar American novel. There are messages scribed here so bent with common sense, compassion, and grace, truths so deeply founded in our conscience as Americans, that they simply cry out to be unfolded. In many ways, this book was born of Atticus Finch's celebrated pronouncement that people can never truly understand others unless they somehow climb into their skin and walk around in it. This decree for true compassion is the foundational message of the novel, and similarly an attribute that is a principal charge of faith. For it is *compassion* that is the origin of what G. K. Chesterton articulated as the "furious love of God." It is with that message of compassion and understanding that I learned to "climb into the skin" of these folks from Maycomb, and discovered that they are deeply and unabashedly reflections of ourselves and our communities. It was with this new way of considering Lee's novel that I began to write *The Mockingbird Parables*, with hopes that together we could better understand how to live in our world—as better human beings, as better neighbors, and ultimately as active participants in the unfolding story of redemption. But what, exactly, are parables?

Parables are simply stories, and stories are not only a powerful way to deliver meaning—stories are the voice of humanity. Consider for just a moment how you might explain your day at work, or how you met your significant other, without the use of stories. We define and explain ourselves, our families, and our communities through stories.

It is an understatement to assert that the Christian faith tradition has a strong foundation in parable telling. The founder Himself taught us using parables, and nothing articulates the power of His storytelling like the Bible. In the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples approached Jesus and asked Him, “Why do you tell stories?” or “Why do you speak in parables?” Jesus responded with some vigorous words about His teaching style: “Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That’s why I tell stories [parables]: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight” (13:10–13 MSG). The disciples, like all good Hebrew boys of the day, would have been very aware of the Torah’s prophecy about the power of Jesus’ storytelling: “I will open my mouth and tell stories; I will bring out into the open things hidden since the world’s first day” (v. 35 MSG). This teacher understood the power of a story and its deep influence over human beings.

Jesus’ parables were not fairy tales or folktales but rather realistic stories that took place in familiar settings of life. They invited His listeners to easily imagine themselves as participants. It is important to understand that Jesus was teaching people who were steeped in religious culture and “church talk.” It was a culture in which every aspect of their lives was centered on religion. The young men of the Jewish tradition actually had entire books of the Torah memorized by the age of twelve. It is curious, then, that securely in the midst of His explanation to the most intimate of His followers about why He chose to teach in parables,

Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah, saying, “Your ears are open but you don’t hear a thing. Your eyes are awake but you don’t see a thing” (v. 14 MSG). So what exactly was Jesus saying to them about these stories?

I vividly remember the day my dad’s grandfather clock was delivered to our house, carried through our front door in a large box by two men from the furniture store. It was a beautiful, ornate clock that sat in the foyer on prominent display for everyone who entered our home to see and to admire. It seemed to tower over me, grand and austere, a beautifully crafted bronze clock face, a cherry wood exterior, and a large glass door that sheltered the pendulum and all the other fascinating machinery in constant *tick-tocking* motion. I grew up with that clock, sleeping soundly, and I took little notice of it. It was simply a part of my landscape. I was never acutely aware of the grandfather clock’s domineering presence in our home until I went away to college. But in my first visit home after being away for several months, I found myself lying awake in my room for miserable hours, covering my ears with pillows, turning on fans, doing anything to sleep through the constant ticking of the pendulum and worse—the ringing of each hour . . . 1:00 a.m. . . . 2:00 a.m. . . . It was like trying to sleep with Big Ben firing away in my brain. My friend Chet recounts a similar story about the time his father took over a new church in a small Kentucky town. The parsonage at the church sat directly next to a busy set of railroad tracks. It took the family months to learn to sleep there, but once they did, he remembers they barely took notice of the large freight trains roaring by in the middle of

the night. The rhythmic, disjointed clamor of cars passing over wood and iron, even the horn of the engine began to come and go completely unnoticed by his family. Chet jokes that his father placed the guest room at the front of the house to ensure they never had company for too many nights.

I believe this might be the point Jesus was making to His followers when He quoted the prophet. I personally find it is easy to become so accustomed to, and comfortable with, religious language that I start to sleep easily through the night, not hearing the words and messages that should keep me awake and vigilant. You see, there are themes and messages in *To Kill a Mockingbird* that have sounded off like the hours of a grandfather clock, waking me like the blaring horn of a freight train, allowing me to hear parts of the gospel to which I had become deaf.

Not that a novel can supplant the story of God, but peering into the courtroom experience with Atticus, watching carefully what happens at the oak tree with Jem and Scout, or sitting with the ladies at the Maycomb missionary tea may provide fresh words and a new perspective to enhance what it means to live a life of faith; as Jesus said, to hear in new ways what has been “hidden since the world’s first day.” You see, faith, by its very nature, is sustained, transformed, and maintained by stories.

Despite the technological revolution, social efforts by the nations of the world, advances in medicine, and the digital connectedness of modern life, our world still seems to be fraught with a deepening sense of anxiety, despair, and isolation. You don’t need to leave your neighborhood these days to find broken people

in desperate need of help and healing. Where have Christians been in all of this?

Somewhere along our journey we have managed to reduce the power of the good news of Jesus to a system of delivery, one that will carry us to the “sweet by and by.” We have managed to relegate Jesus’ command to love your neighbor as yourself to the periphery of our faith practice. It is a dilemma that Harper Lee articulates so profoundly through Miss Maudie, who points out that some people are so concerned with what heaven will be like that they never think about how they should live here on earth and what changes they might bring about, even on their own street. The philosopher Dallas Willard describes this phenomenon in his distinguished work *The Divine Conspiracy*. He implies that we are living in a religious culture in which our primary concern has become to know “whether or not one was going to ‘make the final cut.’”⁵

One might speculate that we have condensed the gospel to the weight and size of a train ticket; our primary goal is to have the conductor punch the card as we piously sit back to watch the broken world pass by outside the window. In doing so, we have ignored the truth found in the command of love from John in chapter 3, verse 16 (“For God so loved the world . . .”). We have forgotten that our primary call is to bring reconciliation to the world—the whole world. C. S. Lewis writes so brilliantly in *The Weight of Glory*, “It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbour.”⁶ And yet that is what many of us have become comfortable

with in the twenty-first century. We have ignored our neighbors. We have forgotten the words of Jesus: “I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me” (Matt. 25:35–36 MSG).

You and I—neighbors, Christians—we are the only vehicle for God’s reconciliation of the world. There is no backup plan. I hope these parables will help you rediscover what it means to be a good neighbor—and to experience the gospel message retold in modern language, unobscured by religious dogma. It is my hope that these parables may, in some small measure, play the role of a grandfather clock in the foyer of your faith. I am inviting you to take part in the story, in anticipation that it might aid you, as it has me, in imagining the possibilities and the hope of the gospel, questioning what it really means to be a person of faith in our world.

Afterword: Compassion in Action

A Conclusion . . . or a Beginning

Winter settled in on us in Ohio when I had finished writing and the colors of fall gave way to dry leaves, dead lawns, and Christmas lights glistening on evergreens down virtually every block of our neighborhood. The sounds of my children playing outside the window of my writing desk gave way to their busyness, laughter, and wrestling inside the warmth of our home. I sat poring over the manuscript with a cup of coffee one morning, considering God and Maycomb, when something outside our window caught my eye. The trees that usually filled my vision were exposed, the limbs bare and open, and for the first time in many months I noticed just over the frosted lawn what the fallen foliage had exposed: I realized I could actually see my neighbor's home from my window. It was a curious revelation that seemed to hold me in that moment.

I reflected that the green leaves of the creative process of writing had aged to gold and floated away to return another season. Without the decorations of new words, fresh growth, the colors of new ideas, like the tree outside, I was left with the

branches and structure of what I had written; and while I had intended the Parable of the Last Word to be just that, the end of the book, it suddenly seemed apparent that I needed to offer a conclusion of sorts: someplace to travel with meaning beyond these pages.

I thought about how isolation from our neighbors is the result of sin and how this issue is addressed in the themes of *To Kill a Mockingbird*—and also how it was the driving force behind God’s visit to earth as a human being. I considered the truth I had encountered in recent studies and surveys that reflected how many people in today’s culture view Christians as generally self-righteous, judgmental, and intolerant—a far cry from the definitions of the One we claim to follow. I was reminded of a line I’d read recently: “A community that . . . truly hears the stories of the crucified Jesus will of necessity remain open to the outsiders and strangers of the world.”¹ The true purpose of *The Mockingbird Parables* is simply the essence of the gospel, the call to put compassion into action: to walk out our front doors and endeavor to truly know and love each other. In the same way we believe in a God who not only moved onto our street, but put on human skin and walked around in it. The point of each parable herein is to model that divine example—to find a way to *be a better neighbor*.

I meditated for a while on the emergence of this clear view of my own neighbor, provided by the winter tree. Isn’t that what we all need? A way to allow the “leaves” that cover and hide us from each other to fall away, to somehow find a way to see, to

know, and to connect with our neighbors? Yes, for those of us who serve a God who moved into our neighborhood, I believe that is our mission.

It is time to put your compassion into action, and I've gathered some resources for you to do so at www.mattlitton.com. I hope that something you have discovered in these pages will motivate you to go to the site and use those resources to advance the message of the gospel through compassion, to be so consumed with that compassion that you cease to view others as outsiders and begin to recognize them for who they really are: your neighbors. It is my desire for you to fervently take part in the invasion of light that occurred two thousand years ago on a lonely hill—to rediscover something that all of us have lost: what it truly means to be a good neighbor.

For more information, click on the “Compassion in Action” link at

www.mattlitton.com