

The Mockingbird Parables

by Matt Litton

Small Group Study Guide

Meeting One—Pre-Reading:

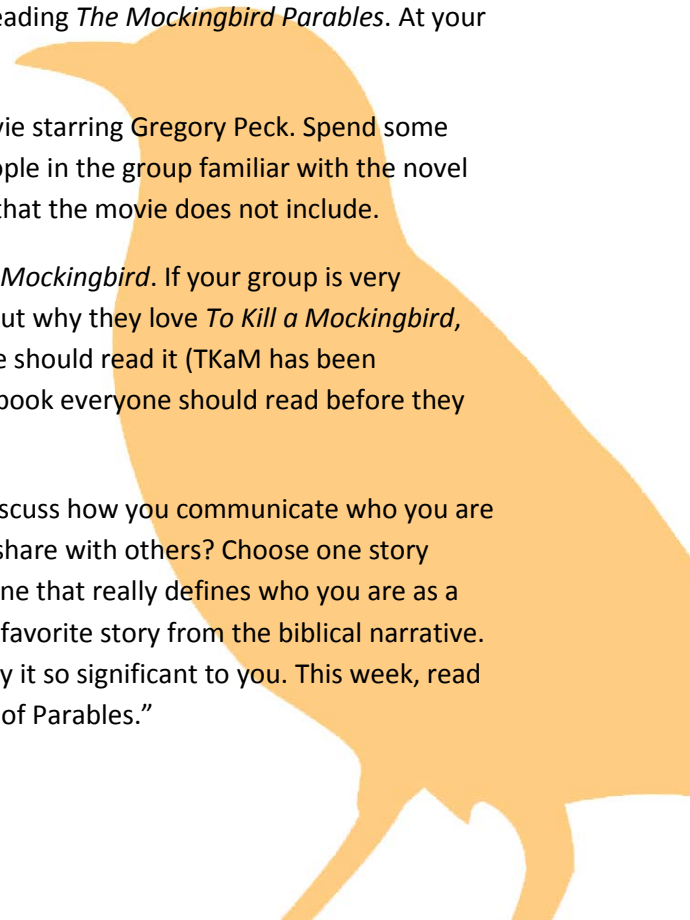
Most people have some familiarity with the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As I discuss in the book, it is the most widely read novel in secondary schools in English speaking countries. It has also sold over sixty million copies. Your reading of *The Mockingbird Parables* only requires a familiarity with Harper Lee's novel and/or the 1962 Academy Award-winning movie; I have written it in a way that non-readers can still grasp the meaning of the parables. I have gone back through my notes for the book and written down the questions about faith that I set out to grapple with in each parable—in hopes that you can join in the “wrestling match.” Keep in mind the questions don’t necessarily reflect my personal opinions. Some will fit perfectly into your small group discussion and some will not. I also included some suggestions for self-reflection and pre-reading questions for discussion at the end of each group meeting. Feel free to use what you would like and discard what you don’t!

I would recommend that your small group meet once before reading *The Mockingbird Parables*. At your first meeting, you can do several things to prepare:

Suggestion 1: Get together and watch the wonderful 1962 movie starring Gregory Peck. Spend some time discussing your favorite parts of the story. If there are people in the group familiar with the novel take a moment to highlight a few significant parts of the story that the movie does not include.

Suggestion 2: Spend some time recounting the plot of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. If your group is very familiar with the novel, ask each person to share a little bit about why they love *To Kill a Mockingbird*, what they learned from the novel, and why they believe people should read it (TKaM has been recommended by the British Librarian Association as “the one book everyone should read before they die”).

Reflection Activity (and Next Week’s Reading)—As a group, discuss how you communicate who you are to other people. What stories about yourself are important to share with others? Choose one story about your life that you believe is the most important . . . the one that really defines who you are as a person and share that story with your group. Also choose your favorite story from the biblical narrative. Share with the group your favorite story from the Bible and why it so significant to you. This week, read the Introduction of *TMP*: “To Kill a Mockingbird and the Power of Parables.”



Meeting Two: “To Kill a Mockingbird and the Power of Parables”

Chapter Discussion Questions:

- The author discusses how we bring our own perspectives to the stories that we encounter. How might being a parent impact your understanding of John 3:16? How important do you think life experience is to the stories we read or watch (even stories from the Gospel narrative)?
- What is the meaning of compassion? How does Atticus’ line about “climbing into someone else’s skin” push us toward compassion?
- How does it impact your faith to consider that Jesus “climbed into human skin and walked around in it?” or to quote Eugene Peterson—he “moved into the neighborhood”?
- Do you agree with the author’s belief that Jesus dying on the cross was a movement grounded in compassion?
- Why (or in what ways) are our personal stories so important to our faith and the faith of others?
- Do you agree with the author that words (even religious words) can be used so many times that they lose their meaning?
- The author points to stories acting as the grandfather clocks (or freight trains) in our faith journeys that wake us up to truths about the Gospel. Can you think of a time where a book, movie, song, or story from another person helped change the way you view God?
- In what ways do we act as if the Gospel is only a “train ticket” to heaven?
- Discuss Miss Maudie’s line: “There are just some kind of men . . . who’re so busy worried about the next world they’ve never learned to live in this one, and you can look down the street and see the results.” Discuss C. S. Lewis’ line: “It may be possible for us to think of heaven too much, it is impossible for us to think too often or too deeply about our neighbors.” What do these words have to say about the way we live out our faith?

Reflection Activity (and Next Week’s Reading)—As a group, spend a couple of moments reflecting on the question, “Who is God?” Think about how you would explain God to a complete stranger over coffee. Spend several moments sketching a picture of God (this might be a challenge for some) or simply sketch images that best represent God. Be creative! For the more artistically challenged, go to the web and print out pictures of some things that you think best represent God. Bring these with you next time to show the group. Read Chapter One: “The Parable of Boo Radley: Discovering Our Divine Mysterious Neighbor.”

Meeting Three: “The Parable of Boo Radley: Discovering Our Divine Mysterious Neighbor”

Chapter Discussion Questions:

- Discuss the role that questions play in your personal relationships.
- Why are we sometimes afraid of asking questions about God?
- When you first read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, were you caught up with the mystery of Boo Radley?
- Why do we want to define God (or other people), how does it limit them and give us power over them?
- What do you think the author means when he talks about “living in the tension of the ‘Who is God’ question?”
- Are you comfortable asking tough questions about faith, about your church, about God?
- Do you think that God reaches out with gifts, like Boo . . . placing them in the “Oak Trees” of our lives?
- If so, what are the things that keep you from noticing those gifts?
- Has there been a time in your life when you felt as though God left a gift specific to you? Can you share that moment with the group?
- How does viewing God as a gift-giver change your ideas about Him?
- In what ways is it difficult for you to believe God intervenes in the world (like Boo Radley, rushing in to save the children from Bob Ewell)?
- How has viewing Boo Radley as a metaphor for God impacted your understanding of God?

Reflection Activity (and Next Week’s Reading)—Spend some time considering what “community” means to you. What does it mean to practice “community”? What kind of neighbor are you? This week, read “The Parable of House Fires and Church Collections: Our Responsibility to Care for the Neighborhood.”

Meeting Four: “The Parable of House Fires and Church Collections: Our Responsibility to Care for the Neighborhood”

Chapter Discussion Questions:

- What do you think has caused the erosion of community life in America?
- In what setting do you experience the deepest sense of community?
- What talents do you have to offer your neighbors? How often do you do this?
- How often are you able to simply offer your presence to others? What does that mean to you? Why do you think it is important?
- What are some challenges with living a life of hospitality toward strangers? Is it even possible to do this in 21st century America? What does having an “open home” mean in terms of your faith, your friends, and your family?
- What are some of the differences in other people that make it hard for you to love them? How can you find enough common ground to connect with these people?
- Think about your most difficult neighbor (no names, please!). Do you think that there are aspects of their lives unknown to you that may impact the way they interact with you or treat you? Is it possible to treat them with love and respect? What can you do to accomplish this?
- What are the “house fires” in your community—and how can you help individually (or as a group)?
- If you are a part of a faith community, do they care for each other the same way The First Purchase Church cares for Helen Robinson? If so, can you share some examples? How can your church or faith community do a better job of caring for the immediate needs of the congregation?
- Do you agree that there are dangers presented in being a good neighbor? Are you willing to take the risks? In what ways can you become a “more dangerous” neighbor?
- How can compassion transform your idea of being a good neighbor? How can it impact your ideas about community?

Reflection Activity (and Next Week’s Reading)—Discuss the following questions: Do you believe gender-equity exists in American culture? What is your opinion regarding women’s role in the church? How has life changed for women since the post-Depression setting of *To Kill a Mockingbird*? What are your favorite qualities about Scout Finch? Read “The Parable of Scout Finch: The Role of Women in Faith.”

Meeting Five: “The Parable of Scout Finch: The Role of Women in Faith”

Introduction Activity: Begin your meeting by reviewing what was discussed in the Reflection Activity. This particular chapter is bound to create some controversy and heated debate. Make sure you come prepared to really listen to the opinions of others!

Chapter Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think Scout makes people in Maycomb uncomfortable?
- Do you think we try to define people’s roles for them?
- Do you think God has designated specific roles for males and females? If so, can you explain what they are?
- According to the qualities we assign to each gender, does God have more feminine or masculine qualities?
- Do you agree that the role of women is central to the story of God?
- Do you think there are still gender expectations in 21st century culture?
- Consider the qualities that women are praised for in our culture. What are they? What impact do you think this might have on young women?
- Do you believe women are capable of leadership? Are they capable of church leadership? Do you believe that it is biblical for women to hold positions of leadership in the church? Explain your ideas.
- How can we encourage women to play bigger roles in leadership?
- What are some practical things we can do to avoid limiting others with our expectations?
- What can we do in our own communities and neighborhoods to ensure that women have the same opportunities as men in church and in the work place?

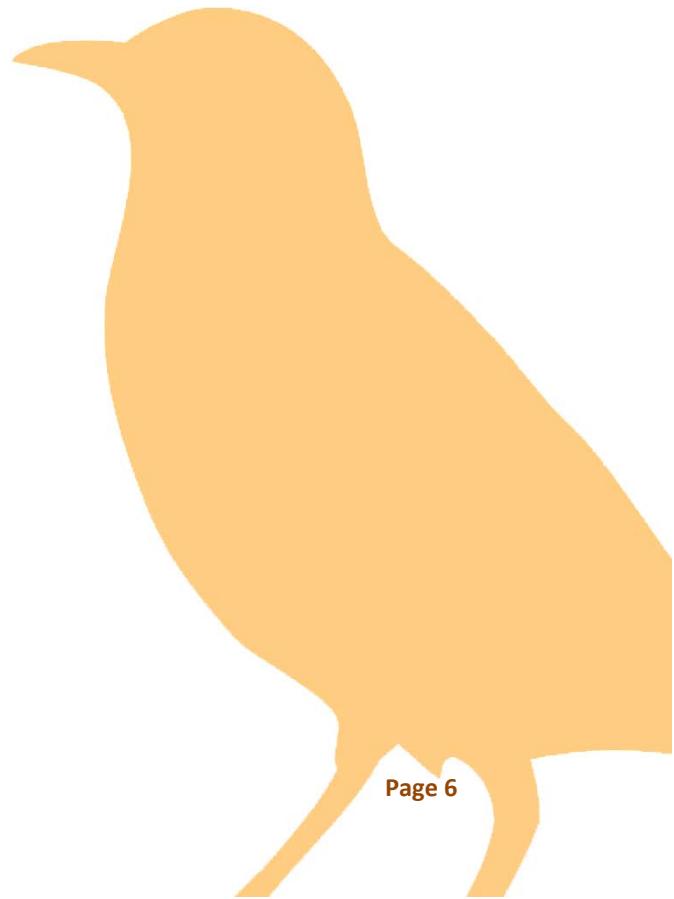
Reflection Activity (and Next Week’s Reading)—Discuss the following questions: Do you believe we have a responsibility to care for our natural environment? How much should that responsibility impact our daily life? How do you think our choices to care for the natural environment impact others? This week, read “The Parable of Miss Maudie’s Azaleas: Our Responsibility to Care for Creation.”

Meeting Six: “The Parable of Miss Maudie’s Azaleas: Our Responsibility to Care for Creation”

Chapter Discussion Questions:

- Do you think there is something spiritual about nature?
- Have you had an experience in nature that created a remarkable memory?
- In what ways has (or can) nature remind us of our place in the world?
- Do you think God holds us accountable to care for the natural environment?
- Setting the politics of environmental issues aside, what impact might our stewardship have on our neighbors?
- Do you think caring for a garden can improve emotional health?
- What can we learn about ourselves from observing the rhythms of nature?
- What do you think we can learn about God from nature?
- In what ways can commitment to our plot of creation encourage community?
- Is there something that we can do as a small group or a church community to be better stewards of our natural environment?

Reflection Activity (and Next Week’s Reading)—Discuss the following question with your group: What is an example of true courage? Who do you know that is courageous? What does that mean to our faith practice? This week, read “The Parable of Atticus Finch: The Model of Christian Courage.”



Meeting Seven: “The Parable of Atticus Finch”

Chapter Discussion Questions:

- What do you admire about Atticus Finch?
- When you think of courage in your own life experiences, who comes to mind?
- Do you agree with Atticus being voted the #1 hero of 20th Century American Film?
- What is pop culture’s definition of courage?
- The lesson Jem learned from the experience with Mrs. Dubose says what to you about courage?
- Can you think of a time where you knew you were going to lose, but continued on anyway? Share that experience.
- Which representation of the jail stand-off scene do you like better . . . the film or the book? Why?
- What is courageous about your faith?
- How do we allow fear and anxiety to make our decisions and/or dictate what we do?
- Do you believe fear and anxiety are simply a matter of trust?
- Explain what you think is divine about courage.
- How did Jesus “take power from violence and place it squarely in the corner of self-sacrifice”?
- Do you agree that courage is always peaceful?
- Do you believe there are times when violence is necessary? When?
- If you believe true courage is grounded in the Resurrection, how should that impact your decisions?

Reflection Activity (and Next Week’s Reading)—Discuss the following questions with your group: How transparent are you with your faith community? What are qualities of a healthy faith community? What are you doing to make a difference in the global community? This week you will read: “The Parable of the Missionary Tea: Our Responsibility to the Global Neighborhood Begins at Home.”

Meeting Eight: “The Parable of the Missionary Tea: Our Responsibility to the Global Community Begins at Home”

Chapter Discussion Questions:

- Do you agree that our dishonesty or lack of transparency can have detrimental repercussions?
- Have you been to a religious function (like the Missionary Tea) where you felt you couldn't be honest . . . transparent?
- How does a lack of transparency affect our church experience?
- Is it possible to consistently come together as a faith community and be transparent? What needs to happen to make that possible?
- How does a lack of transparency on our part leave grace out?
- How do we confuse the message of Jesus with cultural indoctrination?
- When we see our neighbors as “others”, how can we see people oceans away as brothers and sisters?
- Why is it difficult to extend grace without compassion?
- The author points out that it is easy to give to a cause across the world, but unless we are willing to care for the needs of those in our own communities, we won't be practicing the kind of compassion to which the Gospel calls us. How do you think we can remedy this challenge?
- Are there “others” in your neighborhood or community that you have not reached out to?
- Is there a cause across the world that resonates with your community? Your small group? One that you can get involved in?

Reflection Activity (and Next Week's Reading)—Discuss the following questions with your group: Do you think your financial situation is a reflection of your faith and beliefs? Do you feel you are responsible with your finances? Does God place requirements on how we use our money? For next week read: “The Parable of the Great Depression: The Christian Ethic of Financial Responsibility.”

Meeting Nine: “The Parable of the Great Depression: The Christian Ethic of Financial Responsibility”

Chapter Discussion Questions:

- If someone looked at your checking account, what priorities would be found there?
- How often do we get caught up thinking about our next purchase?
- How much of our day is taken up with the noise of advertising?
- What effect do you think the constant noise of our culture has on our lives?
- What do you think Roosevelt’s lines have to say to us today?
- If you have had personal experience with debt, in what ways does it impact your life and your decisions?
- Most likely, we would all say that we value relationships over financial benefit. Can you think of a time when you did something for someone else that either cost your own time or money and there was no benefit for you? How did that make you feel?
- Do you think it is easier for those who have little to give more?
- Wealth is not an evil, but how does it complicate our spiritual life?
- Are there sacrifices you can make to give more to those in need?
- Miss Maudie delivers a beautiful message to the children in her response to Jem about what she has lost in the fire. How can we allow that message to impact our lives?
- Is there something you can do as a group to impact lives in your community through financial giving?

Reflection Activity (and Next Week’s Reading)—Discuss the following questions with your group: How much time do you spend with people of other races, ethnicities, religions, or socio-economic backgrounds? Do you think that race or social class is still a barrier to equality in our culture? What is the key to overcoming inequalities in our world? For next week, read “The Parable of Tom Robinson: How Compassion Can Overcome Our Differences.”

Meeting Ten: “The Parable of Tom Robinson: How Compassion Can Overcome Our Differences”

Chapter Discussion Questions:

- Do you agree that the offensiveness of the racial slurs in *TKaM* add to the novel’s “homily on the evils of racial prejudice”?
- In what ways is “justice” simply a reflection of society’s values and beliefs? Do you think this is still true today?
- Do you think we have really achieved equality in our culture? If so, in what ways have we made progress? What areas still need work?
- How do you think the absence of compassion can lead to hopelessness?
- Do you agree that we begin to accept sin and injustice in the world as we grow older? Do we acquiesce to it by thinking “that’s just the way it is”?
- In what ways is following Jesus a call to idealism? Can you think of some examples?
- In what ways is the conversion from idealism to apathy dangerous to our communities? To our faith?
- When we connect with the suffering of our neighbors, chances are good that we will also suffer their burdens. What does that mean to us? Can you think of an example?
- How has the church been implicit in racial injustice? Do you think that Sunday is still the most segregated day in America? What can we do to change this?
- In what ways do you see diversity as a reflection of God in your own life?
- Do we truly hunger and thirst for God’s righteousness and justice? What does it practically look like to do that in our world?
- What can we do, as people of faith, to continue to bridge racial and ethnic barriers in our culture? In our communities?

Reflection Activity (and Next Week’s Reading)—Discuss the following questions with your group: How do you define good parenting? What is your ultimate goal for your children as a parent? What is your biggest parenting challenge (or what was your parents’ biggest challenge)? For next week, read “The Parable of Raising Jem and Scout Finch: Parenting for Compassion.”

Meeting Eleven: The Parable of Raising Jem and Scout Finch: Parenting for Compassion

Chapter Discussion Questions:

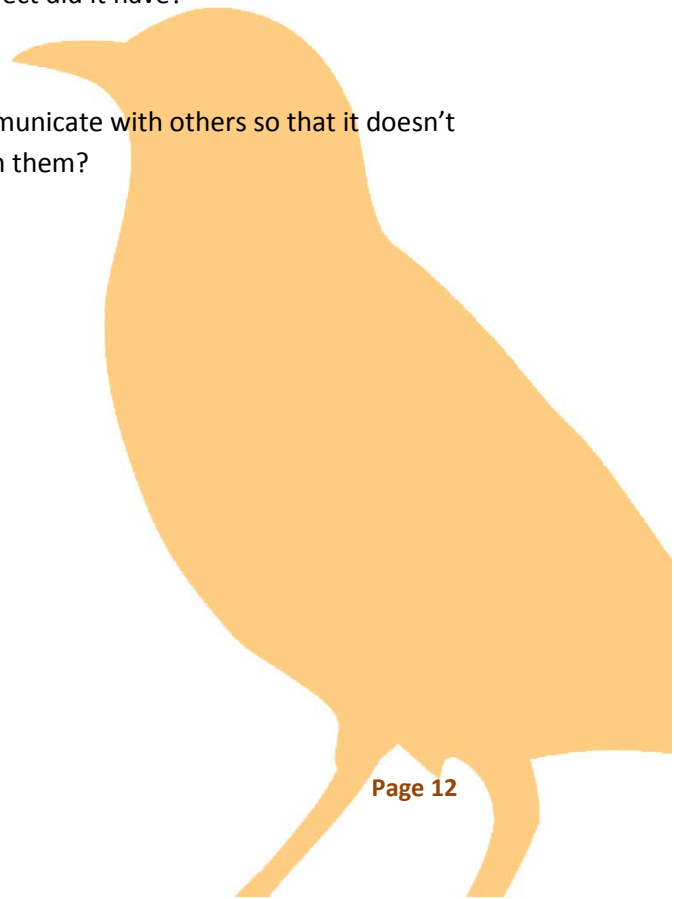
- Isn't it always easy for us to identify our own shortcomings as a parent? What do you believe are your strengths as a parent?
- Reflect on and discuss how your approach to parenting has changed with age and experience.
- If there are older (and wiser) parents in the group, spend some time discussing one particular thing you have learned about parenting from your experience that you might not have agreed with when you were younger.
- How can we better prioritize offering our children our presence? What are the things that keep us from doing that?
- Are we comfortable allowing others to help us parent? Why or why not?
- Do we really view discipline as an expression of love? Can you think of an example of this as a parent or from your childhood experience with your own parents?
- Do we really hold our children accountable for their own actions? In what ways?
- How supportive are we of the authority figures in our children's lives? Why is this a challenge for us? Should we be more trusting with these people?
- Is there ever a time to be dishonest with our children?
- Has there been a time when you were too overprotective with your children? What was the situation? What was the result?
- The greatest lessons we give our children are often found in the way we live our own day to day lives. Can you think of an instance when your children were observing you (without you fully realizing it) and learned something? Is there a lesson you learned from observing the actions of your own parents or guardians?

Reflection Activity (and Next Week's Reading)—Discuss the following questions with your group: Think of a time when someone else's words made a dramatic impact on your life. Was it good or bad? What is the most challenging thing about communicating with others? For next week, read "The Parable of the Last Word: Communicating to Build Community."

Week Twelve: “The Parable of the Last Word: Communicating to Build Community”

Chapter Discussion Questions:

- How often do we really stop and think about the power of what we say?
- How does modern life and technology really impact the way we communicate with each other?
- What is your opinion about Atticus emphasizing to his daughter their connection to their neighbors despite their despicable prejudices?
- Do you think that the way Atticus communicates and conducts his business would make him go unnoticed in today’s culture? Why?
- Do you agree that there is aggression or violence in modern communication? If so, where do you see the expression of this type of communication?
- What can we do to become better listeners?
- How can we soften the tones of our dialogue with others?
- Is it brave to respond to absolute belligerence with patience and compassion? Where do we draw the line?
- What is the difference between truth-telling and perspective-telling?
- When is telling the truth most difficult for us?
- Are there times when we must be careful with the truth? When? Why? How do we know?
- How can political correctness be dangerous?
- Can you think of an example of religious correctness (faith taking on the views of popular culture) that you have personally experienced? What effect did it have?
- What are some practical strategies to avoid gossip?
- How can our communication build community?
- What are some practical ways that we can learn to communicate with others so that it doesn’t erode our connection, and ultimately our influence, with them?



After the Meetings: Compassion in Action

Now that you have completed your study (and hopefully engaged in plenty of wonderful conversations about the meaning of compassion and faith in your own life), I would like to invite you as a group to put that compassion into action. As a reading group, bible study, or book club, I would ask that you go to the “Compassion in Action” page at mattlitton.com, choose a non-profit that you think speaks to the heart of what you are most passionate about and make a community commitment to be involved financially or physically for the next year.

About the Author

Matt Litton is a writer, educator, and speaker who is actively involved at his home church. He is the author of *The Mockingbird Parables: Transforming Lives Through the Power of Story* and has written numerous on-line articles about faith for national media such as *CNN.com*, *Relevant Magazine*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *Christianity Today*, and *The Huffington Post*.

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