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New Book Offers a Unique Approach to the Enduring Spiritual Lessons of *To Kill a Mockingbird* on the Classic's 50th Anniversary

The story of lawyer Atticus Finch's stand against racial injustice in a small Alabama town told through the eyes of his young daughter, Scout, Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is beloved for its indelible characters and moral courage. It is also rich with spiritual lessons that are as relevant today as they were when the book was first published in 1960, says Matt Litton, who takes a unique approach to mining those lessons in his new book, *The Mockingbird Parables* (Tyndale House, July 2010).

Litton sees essential characters and themes of the book as parables teaching about compassion, grace, courage, and the meaning of real community. "There are messages in *To Kill a Mockingbird* that allow me to hear parts of the gospel to which I had become deaf," he says.

The novel is shot through with Christian themes, exemplified when Atticus tells Scout that because of his Christian values, he has to defend Tom Robinson: "This case...is something that goes to the essence of a man's conscience—Scout, I couldn't go to church and worship God if I didn't try to help that man."

Litton identifies parables in the themes of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, such as:

•**Caring for our neighbors:** Maycomb is a community with major warts (racism the most egregious) but there are also instances that demonstrate our responsibility to serve our immediate neighborhoods. Through stories of the town's men coming together to fight a house fire; the pastor at Tom Robinson's church shutting the church doors until a collection is taken up for Tom's family; and Jem noticing a schoolmate's hunger and inviting him home for lunch, we are reminded "what it means to be people who love and care for one another."

•**The role of women in faith:** Scout Finch is a tomboy who prefers overalls to dresses and who refuses to fall into step with church and societal dictates about the role of women. Strong female role models—her neighbor Miss Maudie and the family's housekeeper, Calpurnia—help Scout protect her spirit from being tempered by the expectations of others. "Scout displays a beautiful determination and strength unfettered by the teachings of her church and community," Litton says. "As people of faith, we should recognize and encourage the strength, spirit, and God-given qualities of all people no matter their gender."

•**Atticus Finch as a model of Christian courage:** Atticus defends an African American man falsely accused of rape in a culture where racism is so prevalent that he calls it Maycomb's "usual disease." As Miss Maudie says, Atticus is one of those people who will stand up and do the right thing even when no one else will.

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“Atticus Finch teaches us that courage is far more than one heroic moment; it is a way of life and a principal guided by our faith in someone greater than ourselves,” Litton says. It’s a reminder to followers of Jesus that “courage is not fearlessness, but the sum of all the small decisions we make each day to move the world closer to redemption.”

•**The Christian ethic of financial responsibility:** *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes place during the Great Depression, and the characters practice a very different financial ethic than that which prevails in today’s culture. One character, Mr. Cunningham, a farmer with financial problems, is shown to be someone who will not borrow what he cannot pay back. It’s a value that was common in the 1930s but seems lost on us today, Litton points out.

Litton shows how *To Kill a Mockingbird* repeatedly reinforces how giving is essential to faith, with gifts often given by people who are poor and have little to offer. “The spirit with which the giving is performed demonstrates a deep sense of personal responsibility and respect for their neighbors. If we are to give as God would have us give, these attitudes should reflect the bent of our hearts,” Litton says

•**Compassion:** One of the greatest examples of compassion for a neighbor is portrayed in the character of Tom Robinson, who has made a habit of being neighborly to the lonely and abused Mayella Ewell. This compassion eventually costs him his life.

The book’s message of compassion is articulated by Atticus Finch, who tells his daughter that people can never truly understand others unless they somehow climb into their skin and walk around in it. This is one of the charges of Christian faith, Litton says. “We have managed to relegate Jesus’ command to love your neighbor as yourself to the periphery of our faith practice,” Litton writes, “Harper Lee articulates it 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.”

•**Parenting for Compassion:** Litton, the father of four young children, looks to Atticus Finch as a parenting role model. Atticus parents with wisdom and an implicit sense of trust, allowing the immediate community to invest in the maturing of his children. Litton says there’s a lesson in that trust for today’s parents. “We might be mistaken by shielding children from our neighbors, buying into the idea that the world is no longer safe for them. I think our distrust has more to do with our own isolation. Maybe we don’t trust each other with our children simply because we do not take the time to know each other.”

The Mockingbird Parables is a deeply personal work for Litton. As a high school English teacher, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a work he loves sharing with his students. It also reminds him of his late sister Rachel, a young woman with a Scout-like spirit who died suddenly. His goal, he says, is to echo the gospel’s call to put compassion into action, encouraging readers “to walk out your front doors and endeavor to truly know and love each other.”

The book includes a section of questions and reflections for discussion, and Litton provides additional resources at mattlitton.com.

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About the Author

Matt Litton is a writer, educator, and speaker. He completed undergraduate work in English and Religion and holds a Masters of Arts in Education from Trevecca Nazarene University in Nashville. He and his wife, Kristy, have four children. They live in Cincinnati.