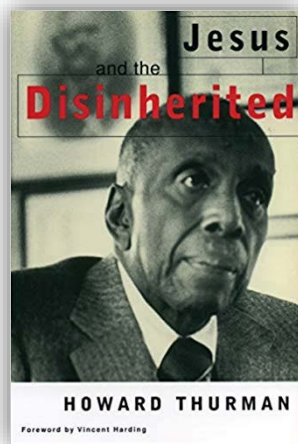


## BOOK REVIEW

# JESUS AND THE DISINHERITED

*By Howard Thurman*

Reviewed by Sara E. Cook



New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press  
1949<sup>1</sup>

Howard Thurman wrote his now classic book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, to describe the evolution of thought from fear and hatred to inclusion through love and community from an African American perspective. In the book, he successfully and richly develops an interpretation of Jesus as a poor Jew brought down to Earth to give everyone the message of God's love and of his sacrifice for us. The message is for all of humanity, as is the salvation, not just for those of wealth and power. Thurman uses the term 'disinherited' for 'the poor,' and to represent those people who have helped to found a society that was not their own despite the fact that it did not support them, and who hold a faith that provided the support society failed to provide in times of persecution and violence.

After an introductory chapter interpreting the life of Jesus, the book contains chapters on, "Fear," "Deception," "Hate," and "Love." Initially, as a white person, I assumed his chapter on fear would be about the fear of not being economically stable, being unable to obtain enough food or proper housing and utilities. But Thurman's view was decidedly different. He

explained that fear among the disinherited stemmed from a lack of self-respect and purpose, and functioned as a hedge against violence and the mental and emotional exhaustion of the marginalized other.

By speaking to others who are "disinherited" in this society, I have come to understand that many still currently operate within this cycle of fear. For instance, many male African Americans are very cautious about how they conduct themselves not only with authority figures such as the police, but also when simply conversing with white people, especially white women. They spoke to me about how the image of the black male has been villainized, exaggerated, and oversexed to become a bigger than life threat to those that are not of the same background. They believe they have to speak and present themselves in certain ways at all times so as not to further this image. Thurman even speaks directly to this way of behaving in saying, "they make their bodies commit to memory ways of behaving that will tend to reduce their exposure to violence" (1949, 40) Thus, the fear that Thurman describes still endures and persists.

Thurman's insight into the destructive cycle of hate begins with "contact without fellowship" defined by Thurman as "contact that is devoid of any of the primary overtures of warmth and fellow-feeling and genuineness." This type of contact spirals into becoming unsympathetic, then develops into ill will, and finally manifests as hatred born out of bitterness and sustained by resentment (1949, 75). This is a wound that festers and offers its bearers a sense of validation. But the sense of significance it offers is hollow and self-destructive and diminishes creative expression.

Above and beyond all else it must be borne in mind that hatred tends to dry up the springs of creative thought in the life of the hater, so that his resourcefulness becomes completely focused on the negative aspects of his environment. The urgent needs of the personality for creative expression are starved to death. A man's horizon may become so completely dominated by the intense character of

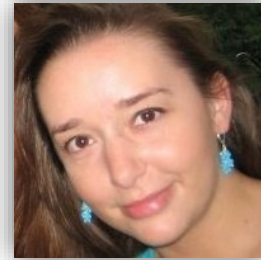
<sup>1</sup> Photo is of the 1996 edition by Beacon Press.

his hatred that there remains no creative residue in his mind and spirit to give to great ideas, to great concepts. (Thurman 1949, 88)

Thurman explains that Jesus rejected hatred because of the detrimental effects not just to the individual that bore it, but to the society against which it was directed, and ultimately to the effects it has on the soul and its relationship with God. Quoting from Thurman's book, "Jesus rejected hatred. It was not because he lacked the vitality or strength. It was not because he lacked the incentive. Jesus rejected hatred because he saw that hatred meant death to the mind, death to the spirit, death to communion with his Father. He affirmed life; and hatred was the great denial" (1949, 88).

In his chapter on love, Thurman presents us with a solution to the plight of the disinherited: forgiveness and reconciliation. Thurman suggests that the act of forgiving their enemies is especially difficult for those who are disinherited, those operating out of fear with their 'backs up against the wall' (1949, 108). Nonetheless, he recommends the breaking of barriers between the races, socioeconomic groups, and even denominational differences. As these barriers are broken, equality and freedom from the burdens of these labels and the stereotypes that come with them will fall away, and we can be unfettered from sin and hatred through love for one another.

Thurman's work provides unique insight from the perspective of the African American community. He reminds us that Jesus taught we should love our neighbors. Every single person. The whole of humanity. Jesus is presented not as a king who came to rule us, but as a liberator who came to free us, not just from our sins, but also from ourselves. According to Thurman, Jesus taught out of love and inclusion. This teaching is applicable in all disciplines of academic study and in all avenues of our lives especially with respect to relationships and communities. It is especially powerful now, when racial tensions are high and have become prevalent once more. I recommend its reading, or rereading, by those of us in the church who wish to contribute to a more loving and peaceful society and by those in academia that work with student populations that may be operating out of this cycle of fear and hatred that Thurman explains instead of from the love and inclusion that Jesus taught.



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