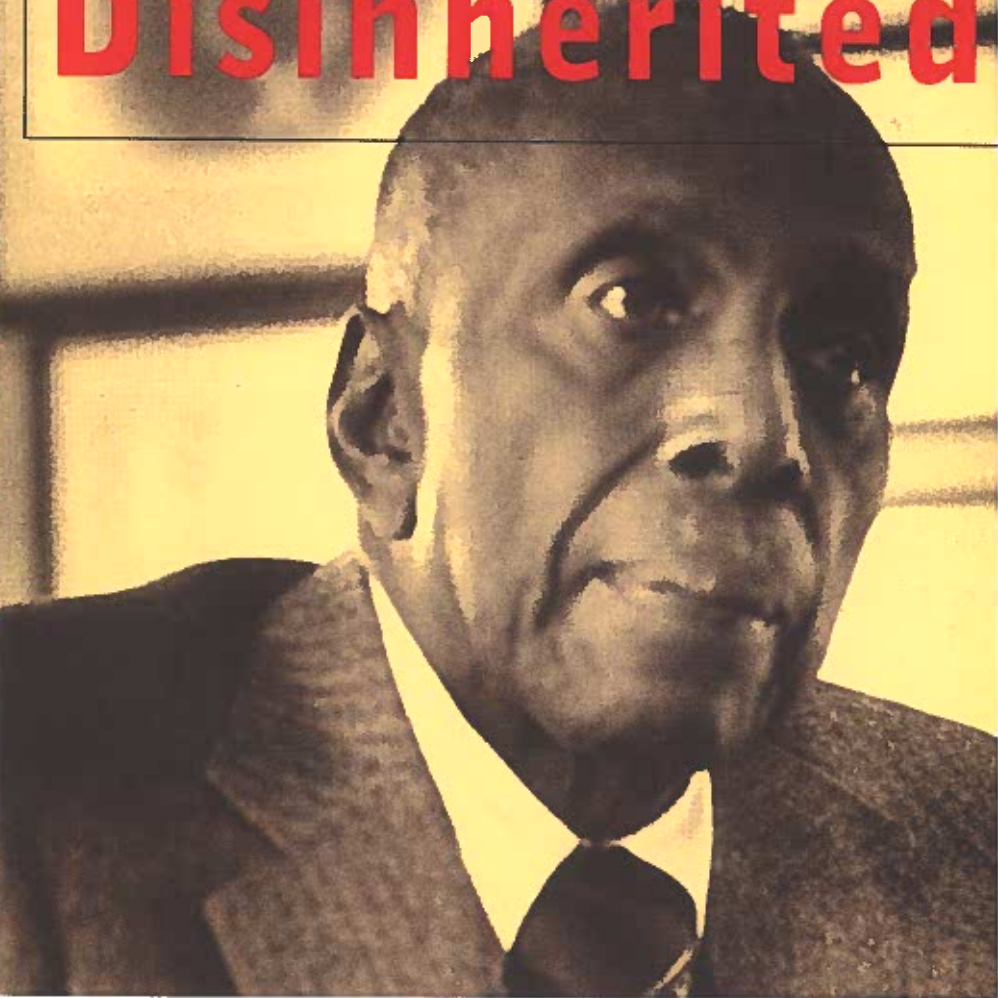


Jesus

and the

Disinherited



HOWARD THURMAN

Foreword by Vincent Harding

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To
My Beloved Daughters
OLIVE and ANNE

and to the future of their generation
in whom the struggles of the
past will find fulfillment

watch. There are some who defer this death by yielding all claim to personal significance beyond the little world in which they live. In the absence of all hope ambition dies, and the very self is weakened, corroded. There remains only the elemental will to live and to accept life on the terms that are available. There is a profound measure of resourcefulness in all life, a resourcefulness that is guaranteed by the underlying aliveness of life itself.

The crucial question, then, is this: Is there any help to be found in the religion of Jesus that can be of value here? It is utterly beside the point to examine here what the religion of Jesus suggests to those who would be helpful to the disinherited. That is ever in the nature of special pleading. No man wants to be the object of his fellow's pity. Obviously, if the strong put forth a great redemptive effort to change the social, political, and economic arrangements in which they seem to find their basic security, the whole picture would be altered. But this is apart from my thesis. Again the crucial question: Is there any help to be found for the disinherited in the religion of Jesus?

Did Jesus deal with this kind of fear? If so, how did he do it? It is not merely, What did he say? even though his words are the important clues available to us.

An analysis of the teaching of Jesus reveals that there is much that deals with the problems created by fear. After his temptation in the wilderness Jesus appeared in the synagogue and was asked to read the lesson. He chose to read from the prophet Isaiah the words which he declared as his fulfillment:

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The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he hath anointed me . . .
to preach deliverance to the captives,
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty them that are bruised,
to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

And he closed the book. . . . And he began to say unto them,
This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.

In the Song of Mary we find words which anticipate the
same declaration of Jesus:

He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.

The most specific statement which Jesus makes dealing
with the crux of the problem is found in the tenth chapter
of Matthew:

Fear them not therefore: for there is nothing covered, that
shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known. . . .
And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill
the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul
and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and
one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father.
But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not
therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.

Again in Luke:

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Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

In the great expression of affirmation and faith found in the Sermon on the Mount there appears in clearest outline the basis of his positive answer to the awful fact of fear and its twin sons of thunder—anxiety and despair:

Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

The core of the analysis of Jesus is that man is a child of God, the God of life that sustains all of nature and guarantees

all the intricacies of the life-process itself. Jesus suggests that it is quite unreasonable to assume that God, whose creative activity is expressed even in such details as the hairs of a man's head, would exclude from his concern the life, the vital spirit, of the man himself. This idea—that God is mindful of the individual—is of tremendous import in dealing with fear as a disease. In this world the socially disadvantaged man is constantly given a negative answer to the most important personal questions upon which mental health depends: "Who am I? What am I?"

The first question has to do with a basic self-estimate, a profound sense of belonging, of counting. If a man feels that he does not belong in the way in which it is perfectly normal for other people to belong, then he develops a deep sense of insecurity. When this happens to a person, it provides the basic material for what the psychologist calls an inferiority complex. It is quite possible for a man to have no sense of personal inferiority as such, but at the same time to be dogged by a sense of social inferiority. The awareness of being a child of God tends to stabilize the ego and results in a new courage, fearlessness, and power. I have seen it happen again and again.

When I was a youngster, this was drilled into me by my grandmother. The idea was given to her by a certain slave minister who, on occasion, held secret religious meetings with his fellow slaves. How everything in me quivered with the pulsing tremor of raw energy when, in her recital, she would come to the triumphant climax of the minister: "You—you are not niggers. You—you are not slaves. You are God's children."

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This established for them the ground of personal dignity, so that a profound sense of personal worth could absorb the fear reaction. This alone is not enough, but without it, nothing else is of value. The first task is to get the self immunized against the most radical results of the *threat* of violence. When this is accomplished, relaxation takes the place of the churning fear. The individual now feels that he counts, that he belongs. He senses the confirmation of his roots, and even death becomes a little thing.

All leaders of men have recognized the significance of this need for a sense of belonging among those who feel themselves disadvantaged. Several years ago I was talking with a young German woman who had escaped from the Nazis; first to Holland, then France, England, and finally to America. She described for me the powerful magnet that Hitler was to German youth. The youth had lost their sense of belonging. They did not count; there was no center of hope for their marginal egos. According to my friend, Hitler told them: "No one loves you—I love you; no one will give you work—I will give you work; no one wants you—I want you." And when they saw the sunlight in his eyes, they dropped their tools and followed him. He stabilized the ego of the German youth, and put it within their power to overcome their sense of inferiority. It is true that in the hands of a man like Hitler, power is exploited and turned to ends which make for havoc and misery; but this should not cause us to ignore the basic soundness of the theory upon which he operated.

A man's conviction that he is God's child automatically tends to shift the basis of his relationship with all his fellows.

He recognizes at once that to fear a man, whatever may be that man's power over him, is a basic denial of the integrity of his very life. It lifts that mere man to a place of pre-eminence that belongs to God and to God alone. He who fears is literally delivered to destruction. To the child of God, a scale of values becomes available by which men are measured and their true significance determined. Even the threat of violence, with the possibility of death that it carries, is recognized for what it is—merely the threat of violence with a death potential. Such a man recognizes that death cannot possibly be the worst thing in the world. There *are* some things that are worse than death. To deny one's own integrity of personality in the presence of the human challenge is one of those things. "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do," says Jesus.

One of the practical results following this new orientation is the ability to make an objective, detached appraisal of other people, particularly one's antagonists. Such an appraisal protects one from inaccurate and exaggerated estimations of another person's significance. In a conversation with me Lincoln Steffens once said that he was sure he could rear a child who was a member of a minority group or who was a habitué of a ghetto so as to immunize him against the corroding effects of such limitations.

He said: "I would teach him that he must never call another man 'great'; but that he must always qualify the term with the limiting phrase 'as to,' of the Greek language. A man is never great in general, but he may be great as to something in particular.

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“Let me give you an illustration. Once I was the house guest in Berlin of one of the world’s greatest scientists. During the first few days of my sojourn, I was completely disorganized. I was nervous, tended to be inarticulate, generally confused, and ill at ease. I had either to get a hold on myself or bring my visit abruptly to an end. One morning while shaving it occurred to me that despite my profound limitations of knowledge in physics and mathematics, I knew infinitely more about politics than did my host. At breakfast I found my tongue and my dignity, and the basis of equality between us was at once restored. My host was a great man *as to* his particular field of natural science, while I was competent in the field of contemporary politics and affairs. This awareness gave me my perspective.”

The illustration anticipates the second basic question that must be answered by the disinherited: “What am I?” This question has to do, not with a sense of innate belonging, but rather with personal achievement and ability. All of the inner conflicts and frustrations growing out of limitations of opportunity become dramatically focused here. Even though a man is convinced of his infinite worth as a child of God, this may not in itself give him the opportunity for self-realization and fulfillment that his spirit demands. Even though he may no longer feel himself threatened by violence, the fact remains that for him doors often are closed. There are vocational opportunities that are denied him. It is obvious that the individual must reckon with the external facts of his environment, especially those that constrict his freedom.

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There is something more to be said about the inner equipment growing out of the great affirmation of Jesus that a man is a *child* of God. If a man's ego has been stabilized, resulting in a sure grounding of his sense of personal worth and dignity, then he is in a position to appraise his own intrinsic powers, gifts, talents, and abilities. He no longer views his equipment through the darkened lenses of those who are largely responsible for his social predicament. He can think of himself with some measure of detachment from the shackles of his immediate world. If he equips himself in terms of training in this mood, his real ability is brought into play. The fact that he is denied opportunity will not necessarily deter him. He will postpone defeat until defeat itself closes in upon him. The interesting fact is that defeat may not close in upon him. Curious indeed is the notion that plays hide-and-seek with human life: "I may be an exception." A large measure of illusion and self-deception is implicit in this notion, but again and again it has come to the rescue of desperate people forced to take desperate chances.

The psychological effect on the individual of the conviction that he is a child of God gives a note of integrity to whatever he does. It provides character in the sense of sure knowledge and effective performance. After all, this is what we mean by character when applied to ability in action. When a man is sick and calls a doctor, what he wants most to know about the doctor is not the make of his automobile, or whether he obeys traffic signals, or what church he attends, or how many children he has, or if he is married. What is most crucial

about the doctor, so far as the sick man is concerned, is, Can he practice medicine?

Now, what we are discussing has profound bearing upon the kind of assurance and guidance that should be given to children who seem destined to develop a sense of defeat and frustration. The doom of the children is the greatest tragedy of the disinherited. They are robbed of much of the careless rapture and spontaneous joy of merely being alive. Through their environment they are plunged into the midst of overwhelming pressures for which there can be no possible preparation. So many tender, joyous things in them are nipped and killed without their even knowing the true nature of their loss. The normal for them is the abnormal. Youth is a time of soaring hopes, when dreams are given first wings and, as reconnoitering birds, explore unknown landscapes. Again and again a man full of years is merely the corroboration of the dreams of his youth. The sense of fancy growing out of the sense of fact—which makes all healthy personalities and gives a touch of romance and glory to all of life—first appears as the unrestrained imaginings of youth.

But the child of the disinherited is likely to live a heavy life. A ceiling is placed on his dreaming by the counsel of despair coming from his elders, whom experience has taught to expect little and to hope for less. If, on the other hand, the elders understand in their own experiences and lives the tremendous insight of Jesus, it is possible for them to share their enthusiasm with their children. This is the qualitative overtone springing from the depths of religious insight, and it is contagious. It will put into the hands of the

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child the key for unlocking the door of his hopes. It must never be forgotten that human beings can be conditioned in favor of the positive as well as the negative. A great and central assurance will cause parents to condition their children to high endeavor and great aspiring, and these in turn will put the child out of the immediate, clawing reaches of the tense or the sustained negations of his environment. I have seen it happen. In communities that were completely barren, with no apparent growing edge, without any point to provide light for the disadvantaged, I have seen children grow up without fear, with quiet dignity and such high purpose that the mark which they set for themselves has even been transcended.

The charge that such thinking is merely rationalizing cannot be made with easy or accepted grace by the man of basic advantage. It ill behooves the man who is not forced to live in a ghetto to tell those who must how to transcend its limitations. The awareness that a man is a child of the God of religion, who is at one and the same time the God of life, creates a profound faith in life that nothing can destroy.

Nothing less than a great daring in the face of overwhelming odds can achieve the inner security in which fear cannot possibly survive. It is true that a man cannot be serene unless he possesses something about which to be serene. Here we reach the high-water mark of prophetic religion, and it is of the essence of the religion of Jesus of Nazareth. Of course God cares for the grass of the field, which lives a day and is no more, or the sparrow that falls unnoticed by the wayside. He also holds the stars in their appointed places, leaves his mark in every living thing. And he cares for me! To be assured of

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this becomes the answer to the threat of violence—yea, to violence itself. To the degree to which a man knows *this*, he is unconquerable from within and without.

When I was a very small boy, Halley's comet visited our solar system. For a long time I did not see the giant in the sky because I was not permitted to remain up after sundown. My chums had seen it and had told me perfectly amazing things about it. Also I had heard of what were called "comet pills." The theory was that if the pills were taken according to directions, then when the tail of the comet struck the earth one would not be consumed. One night I was awakened by my mother, who told me to dress quickly and come with her out into the backyard to see the comet. I shall never forget it if I live forever. My mother stood with me, her hand resting on my shoulder, while I, in utter, speechless awe, beheld the great spectacle with its fan of light spreading across the heavens. The silence was like that of absolute motion. Finally, after what seemed to me an interminable time interval, I found my speech. With bated breath I said, "What will happen to us if that comet falls out of the sky?"

My mother's silence was so long that I looked from the comet to her face, and there I beheld something in her countenance that I had seen only once before, when I came into her room and found her in prayer. When she spoke, she said, "Nothing will happen to us, Howard; God will take care of us."

O simplehearted mother of mine, in one glorious moment you put your heart on the ultimate affirmation of the human spirit! Many things have I seen since that night. Times

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without number I have learned that life is hard, as hard as crucible steel; but as the years have unfolded, the majestic power of my mother's glowing words has come back again and again, beating out its rhythmic chant in my own spirit. Here are the faith and the awareness that overcome fear and transform it into the power to strive, to achieve, and not to yield.