

# JESUS AND THE DISINHERITED

by Howard Thurman  
Beacon Press, Boston 1976/1996

## Chapter Four

Hate is another of the hounds of hell that dog the footsteps of the disinherited in season and out of season. During times of war hatred becomes quite respectable, even though it has to masquerade often under the guise of patriotism. To even the casual observer during the last war it was obvious that the Pearl Harbor attack by the Japanese gave many persons in our country an apparent justification for indulging all of their anti colored feelings. In a Chicago cab, enroute to the University from Englewood, this fact was dramatized for me. The cab had stopped for a red light. Apropos of no conversation the driver turned to me, saying, "Who do they think they are? Those little yellow dogs think they can do that to white men and get away with it!"

During the early days of the war I noticed a definite rise in rudeness and overt expressions of color prejudice, especially in trains and other public conveyances. It was very simple; hatred could be brought out into the open, given a formal dignity and a place of respectability. But for the most part we are not vocal about our hatred. hating is something of which to be ashamed unless it provides for us a form of validation and prestige. If either is provided, then the immoral or amoral character of the hatred is transformed into positive violence.

Christianity has been almost sentimental in its effort to deal with hatred in human life. It has sought to get rid of hatred by preachments, by moralizing, by platitudinous judgments. It has hesitated to analyze the basis of hatred and to evaluate it in terms of its possible significance in the lives of the people possessed by it. This reluctance to examine hatred has taken on the character of a superstition. It is a subject that is taboo unless there is some extraordinary social crisis—such as war—involving the mobilization of all the national resources of the common life to meet it. There is a conspiracy of silence about hatred, its function and its meaning.

Hatred cannot be defined. it can only be described. If I were to project a simple diagram of hatred, revealing the anatomy of its development, the idea would break down as follows.

In the first place, hatred often begins in a situation in which there is contact without fellowship, contact that is devoid of any of the primary overtures of warmth and fellow-feeling and genuineness. of course, ti must be borne in mind that there can be an

abundance of sentimentality masquerading under the cloak of fellowship. It is easy to have fellowship on your own terms and to repudiate it if your terms are not acceptable. It is this kind of fellowship that one finds often in the South between whites and Negroes. As long as the Negro is called John or Mary and accepts the profoundly humiliating position of an inferior status, fellowship is quite possible. Great sacrifices are even made for him, and all the weight of position and power are at the disposal of the weaker person. It is precisely because of this false basis of fellowship so often found that in the section of the country where there is the greatest contact between Negro and white there is the least real fellowship, and the first step along the road of bitterness and hatred is assured.

When we give to the concept of wider application, it is clear that much of modern life is so impersonal that there is always opportunity for the seeds of hatred to grow unmolested. Where there are contacts devoid of genuine fellowship, such contacts stand in immediate candidacy for hatred.

In the second place, contacts without fellowship tend to express themselves in the kind of understanding that is strikingly unsympathetic. There is understanding of a kind, but it is without the healing and reinforcement of personality. Rather, it is like the experience of going into a man's office and, in that moment before being seated, when the full gaze of the other is focused upon you, suddenly wondering whether the top button of your vest is in place, but not daring to look. In a penetrating, incisive, cold understanding there is no cushion to absorb limitations or to provide extenuating circumstances for protection.

It is a grievous blunder to assume that understanding is always sympathetic. Very often we use the phrase "I understand" to mean something kindly, warm, and gracious. But there is an understanding that is hard, cold, minute, and deadly. It is the kind of understanding that one gives to the enemy, or that is derived from an accurate knowledge of another's power to injure. There is an understanding of another's weakness, which may be used as a weapon of offense or defense. Understanding that is not the outgrowth of an essential fellow-feeling is likely to be unsympathetic. Of course, there may be pity in it—even compassion, sometimes—but sympathy, almost never. I can sympathize only when I see myself in another's place.

Unsympathetic understanding is the characteristic attitude governing the relation between the weak and the strong. All kinds of first aid may be rendered to the weak; they may be protected so long as there is the abject acknowledgment of their utter dependence upon the strong. When the Southern white person says, "I understand the Negro," what he really means is that he has a knowledge of the Negro within the limitations of the boundaries which the white man has set up. The kind of Negro he understands has no existence except in his own mind.

In the third place, an unsympathetic understanding tends to express itself in the active functioning of ill will. A few years ago I was going from Chicago to Memphis, Tennessee. I found a seat across from an elderly lady, who took immediate cognizance of my presence. When the conductor came along for the tickets, she said to him, pointing in my direction, "What is *that* doing in this car?"

The conductor answered, with a touch of creative humor, "*That* has a ticket."

For the next fifty miles this lady talked for give or ten or fifteen minutes with each person who was seated alone in that coach, setting forth her philosophy of human relationships and the basis of her objection to my presence in the car. I was able to see the atmosphere in the entire car shift from common indifference to active recognition of and, to some extent, positive resentment of my presence; an ill will spreading its virus by contagion.

In the fourth place, ill will, when dramatized in a human being, becomes hatred walking on the earth. The outline is now complete and simple—contacts with fellowship developing hatred and expressing themselves in unsympathetic understanding; an unsympathetic understanding tending to express itself in the exercise of ill will; and ill will, dramatized in a man or woman, becoming hatred walking on the earth.

In many analyses of hatred it is customary to apply it only to the attitude of the strong towards the weak. The general impression is that many white people hate Negroes and that Negroes are merely the victims. Such an assumption is quite ridiculous. I was once seated in a Jim Crow car which extended across the highway at a railway station in Texas. Two Negro girls of about fourteen or fifteen sat behind me. One of them looked out of the window and said, "Look at those kids." She referred to two little white girls, who were skating towards the train. "Wouldn't it be funny if they fell and splattered their brains all over the pavement!" I looked at them. Through what torture chambers had they come—torture chambers that had so attacked the grounds of humaneness in them that there was nothing capable of calling forth any appreciation or understanding of white persons? There was something that made me shiver.

Hatred, in the mind and spirit of the disinherited, is born out of great bitterness—a bitterness that is made possible by sustained resentment which is bottled up until it distills an essence of vitality, giving to the individual in whom this is happening a radical and fundamental basis for self-realization.

Let me illustrate this. Suppose you are one of five children in a family and it happened, again and again, that if there was just enough for four children in any given circumstance, you were the child who had to do without. If there was money for four pairs of shoes and

five pairs were needed, it was you who did without shoes. If there were five piece of cake on the plate, four healthy slices and one small piece, you are given the small slice. At first, when this happened, you overlooked it, because you thought that your sister and brothers, each in his turn, would have the same experience; but they did not. Then you complained quietly to the brother who was closest to you in understanding, and he thought that you were being disloyal to your mother and father to say such a thing. IN a moment of self-righteousness you spoke to your father about it. Your father put you on the carpet so severely that you decided not to mention it again, but you kept on watching. The discrimination continued.

At night, when the lights were out and you were safely tucked away in bed, you reached down into the quiet places of your little heart and lifted out your bundle of hates and resentments growing out of the family situation, and you fingered them gently, one by one. In the darkness you muttered to yourself, "They can keep me from talking about it to them, but they can't keep me from resenting it. I hate them for what they are doing to me. No one can prevent me there." Hatred becomes for you a source of validation for your personality. s you consider the family and their attitude toward you, your hatred gives you a sense of significance which you going defiantly into the teeth of their estimate of you.

In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* there is an expression of this attitude. You will doubtless recall the story. Ahab has had his leg bitten off in an encounter with the white whale. He collects a motley crew, and they sail into the northern seas to find and conquer the whale. A storm comes up at sea, and Ahab stands on deck with his ivory leg fastened to the floor. he leans against the railing in utter defiance of the storm. His hair is disheveled, his face is furrowed, and there is a fever in his blood that only the conquest of the white whale can cure. In effect, he says to the lightning, "You may destroy this vessel, you may dry up the bowels of the sea, you may consume me; *but I can still be ashes.*" It is this kind of attitude that is developed in the mind and soul of the weak and the disinherited. As they look out upon their world, they recognize at once that they are the victims of a systematic denial of the rights and privileges that are theirs, by virtue both of their being human and of their citizenship. Their acute problem is to deal with the estimate that their environment places upon them; for the environment, through its power-controlling and prestige-bearing representatives, has announced to them that they do not rate anything other than that which is being visited upon them. If they accept this judgment, then the grounds of their self-estimate is destroyed, and their acquiescence becomes an endorsement of the judgment of the environment. Because they are despised, they despise themselves. If they reject the judgment, hatred may serve as a device for rebuilding, step by perilous step, the foundation for individual significance; so that from within the intensity of their necessity they declare their right to exist, despite the judgment of the environment.

I remember that once, when moving from one home to another, I came upon a quiet family of mice in a box in the basement. Their presence created a moral problem for me, for I did not feel that I had the right to take their lives. Then I remembered my responsibility to the family that was moving in and, with heaviness of heart, I took my daughter's little broom and descended upon them with a might stroke. Sensing the impending tragedy, one of them raised himself on his haunches to meet the stroke of the broom with a squeal of defiance, affirming the core of his mouse integrity in the face of descending destruction. Hatred makes this sort of profound contribution to the life of the disinherited, because it establishes a dimension of self-realization hammered out of the raw materials of injustice.

A distinct derivative from hatred's contribution to self-realization, when self-realization is established as a rallying point for personality, is the tremendous source of dynamic energy provided. Surplus energy is created and placed at the disposal of the individual's needs and ends. In a sense the whole personality is alerted. All kinds of supports for implementing one's affirmed position are seized upon. A strange, new cunning possesses the mind, and every opportunity for taking advantage, for defeating the enemy, is revealed in clear perspective. One of the salient ways by which this expresses itself is the quality of endurance that appears. It is the sort of thing that causes a little boy, when he is being overpowered by a big boy, to refrain from tears or from giving any expression that will reveal the depths of his pain and hurt. He says to himself grimly, "I'll die before I cry."

I have already pointed out that the relationship between the strong and the weak is characterized often by its amoral aspect. When hatred serves as a dimension of self-realization, the illusion of righteousness is easy to create. Often there are but thin lines between bitterness, hatred, self-realization, defiance, and righteous indignation. The logic of the strong-weak relationship is to place all moral judgment of behavior out of bounds. A type of behavior that, under normal circumstances, would call for self-condemnation can very easily, under these special circumstances, be regarded as necessary and therefore defensible. To take advantage of the strong is regarded merely as settling an account. It is open season all the time, without the operation of normal moral inhibitions. It is a form of the old *lex talionis*—eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.

Thus hatred becomes a device by which an individual seeks to protect himself against moral disintegration. He does to other human beings what he could not ordinarily do to them without losing his self-respect. This is an aspect of hatred that has almost universal application during a time of war and national crisis. Doubtless you will recall that during the last war a very interesting defense of hatred appeared in America. The reasoning ran something like this: American boys have grown up in a culture and a civilization in which they have absorbed certain

broad attitudes of respect for human personality, and other traits characteristic of gentlemen of refinement and dignity. Therefore they are not prepared psychologically or emotionally to become human war machines, to make themselves conscious instruments of death. Something radical has to happen to their personality and their over-all outlook to render them more effective tools of destruction. The most effective way by which this transformation can be brought about is through discipline in hatred; for if they hate the enemy, then that hatred will immunize them from a loss of moral self-respect as they do to the enemy what is demanded of them in the successful prosecution of the war.

To use a figure, a curtain was dropped in front of their moral values and their ethical integrity as human beings and Americans, and they moved around in front of that curtain to do their death-dealing work on other human beings. The curtain of protection was the disciplined hatred. A simple illustration of what I mean is this: There are some people who cannot tell you face to face precisely what they think of you unless they get angry first. Anger serves as a protection of their finer sense of values as they look you in the eye and say things which, under ordinary circumstances, they would not be able to say.

When I was a boy, my mother occasionally found it necessary to punish me and my sister. My sister, when whipped, would look my mother in the face, showing no visible signs of emotional reaction. This attitude caused the burden to shift from her shoulders to my mother's shoulders, with the result that my mother did not whip my sister with such intensity growing out of self-righteous indignation as if the reaction had been otherwise. When my turn came, all the neighbors knew what was happening in the Thurman family. Therefore my mother whipped me with an attention to detail that was radically different from the experience she had with my sister. My attitude fed her indignation to the point of giving her complete immunity from self-condemnation. This is precisely what hatred does in human beings faced with hard and brutal choices in dealing with each other.

It is not difficult to see how hatred, operating in this fashion, provides for the weak a basis for moral justification. Every expression of intolerance, every attitude of meanness, every statute that limits and degrades, given further justification for life-negation on the part of the weak toward the strong. It makes possible for an individual to be life-affirming and life-negating at one and the same time. If a man's attitude is life-negating in his relationships with those to whom he recognizes no more a responsibility, his conduct is without condemnation in his own mind. In his relations with his fellows to whom he recognizes moral responsibility, his attitude is life-affirming. There must be within him some guarantee against contagion by the life-negating attitude, lest he lose a sense of moral integrity in all of his relationships. Hatred seems to function as such a guarantee. The oppressed can give themselves over with utter enthusiasm to life-affirming attitudes toward their fellow sufferers, and this becomes compensation for their life-negating attitude toward the strong.

Of course, back of this whole claim of logic is the idea that there is a fundamental justice in life, upon which the human spirit in its desperation may rely. In its more beatific definition it is the basis of the composure of the martyr who is being urned at the stake; he seems to be caught up in the swirl of elemental energy and power that transforms the weakness and limitation of his personality into that which makes of him a superhuman being.

It is clear, then, that for the weak, hatred seems to serve a creative purpose. It may be judged harshly by impersonal ethical standards, but as long as the weak see it as being inextricably involved in the complicated technique of survival with dignity, it cannot easily be dislodged. Jesus understood this. What must have passed through his mind when he observed the contemptuous disregard for the Jews by the Romans, whose power had closed in on Israel? What thoughts raced through his mind when Judas of Galilee raised his rallying banner of defiance, sucking into the tempest of his embittered spirit many of the sons of Judah? Is it reasonable to assume that Jesus did not understand the anatomy of hatred? In the face of the obvious facts of his environment he counseled against hatred, and his word is, "Love your enemies...that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he taketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." Why?

Despite all the positive psychological attributes of hatred we have outlined, hatred destroys finally the core of the life of the hater. While it lasts, burns in white heat, its effect seems positive and dynamic. But at last it turns to ash, for it guarantees a final isolation from one's fellows. It blinds the individual to all values of worth, even as they apply to himself and to his fellows. Hatred bears deadly and bitter fruit. It is blind and nondiscriminatory. True, it begins by exercising specific discrimination. This it does by centering upon the persons responsible for the situations which create the reaction of resentment, bitterness, and hatred. But once hatred is released, it cannot be confined to the offenders alone. It is difficult for hatred to be informed as to objects when it gets under way, I remember that when I was an undergraduate in Atlanta, Georgia, a man came into the president's office, in which I was the errand boy. The president was busy, so the man engaged me in conversation. Eventually he began talking about his two little boys. He said, among other things, "I am rearing my boys so that they will not hate Negroes. Do not misunderstand me. I do not love them, but I am wise enough to know that if I teach my boy to hate Negroes, they will end up hating white people as well." Hatred cannot be controlled once it is set in motion.

Some years ago a medical friend of mine gave me a physical examination. After weighing me he said, "You'd better watch your weight. You are getting up in years now, and your weight will have a bad effect on your vital organs." He explained this in graphic detail. While he was talking, I chuckled; for, as I looked at him, I saw a man about 5 feet 4 inches in height who weighed 215 pounds. My friend, the doctor, though his body knew that he was a doctor. But his body did not know he was a doctor; the only thing it knew was that he was accumulating more energy through his food than his body was able to consume. Hence his body did precisely what mine was doing. It stored energy in the form of fat.

Hatred is like that. It does not know anything about the pressures exerted upon the weak by the strong. It knows nothing about the extenuating circumstances growing out of a period of national crisis, making it seemingly necessary to discipline men in hatred of other human beings. The terrible truth remains. The logic of the development of hatred is death to the spirit and disintegration of ethical and moral values.

Above and beyond all else it must be none 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 his hatred that there remains no creative residue in his mind and spirit to give to great ideas, to great concepts. he becomes lopsided. To use the phrase from Zarathustra, he becomes "a cripple in reverse."

Jesus rejected hatred. It was not because he lacked the vitality or the 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. To him it was clear

Thou must not make division.  
Thy mind, heart, soul and strength must ever search.  
To find the way by which the road  
To all men's need of thee must go,  
This is the Highway of the Lord.