

HOWARD THURMAN MODULE (5 PARTS)

1. Introducing Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart.

*Those familiar words belong to Howard Thurman, who is regarded by many as the spiritual father of the Civil Rights Movement. Born in 1899, he grew up knowing the power of segregated intimidation in the divided world of Daytona, Florida. Though he was never an activist, his spiritual understanding of the power of mystical encounter with God saturated the thought, faith, and action of those who faced the violence of white rage. It is said that Martin Luther King carried a copy of Thurman's seminal work, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, much of the time.*

Learn more about Thurman, his life and thought, by watching "Backs Against the Wall: the Howard Thurman Story." <https://vimeo.com/300504888/6ed348db8f>

2. Thurman: The Spiritual Basis of Non-Violent Resistance to Evil

Reflect further on the source of spiritual strength for Howard Thurman. **Remember** how he described the heart of his grandmother's faith (beginning at about 12:24 in *Backs Against the Wall* and continuing until 16:40). <https://vimeo.com/300504888/6ed348db8f>

"The Creator of Existence also created me and therefore, with that sort of backing, I could absorb all the violences of life."

Consider these observations from "Prayerful Resistance: Howard Thurman's Contemplative Non-Violence" by Myles Werntz (Christian Century, August 28, 2019)

Thurman's teaching shaped King's belief that conflict can be resolved only through the love of God, not by more conflict. Both political and interpersonal conflicts, Thurman wrote, are self-perpetuating. The wounded end up wounding others, creating an endless desire for revenge. The mystical encounter with God, by contrast, replaces our self-righteous need for vindication with a desire for union.

Thurman presents a twofold challenge: those who would be contemplative must identify with those who are suffering, and those who would address suffering must be contemplative. To know the God who joins with the oppressed, with those whose "backs are against the wall," is to submit oneself to that God in prayer. In doing so, our transformation goes all the way down to our bones; we become people who can embody the way of Jesus, chastened in prayers and quieted in our anger, steeled with a moral courage that no violence can efface.

Contemplate

Have you known a "self-righteous need for vindication"?

What prompted it?

How did you respond?

How can a mystical encounter with God quiet that need?

3. Thurman: The Church's Historic Role in Sustaining the Evil of Racism

Listen again to Thurman's reflection on the role of the church in sustaining the evil of racism, *beginning at about 9:24 in Backs Against the Wall and continuing until 10:04.*

<https://vimeo.com/300504888/6ed348db8f>

Consider your visceral response to the images of white-robed Klansmen gathered in a church sanctuary standing beneath the banner "Jesus Saves."

Reflect further:

In his seminal book *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), Thurman offers a strong critique of American Christianity because of what he perceives as its tacit (if not vocal) support for a system of racial discrimination and injustice. He distinguishes between institutional Christianity, which he describes as the religion *about* Jesus, and the religion *of* Jesus, which addresses and champions the oppressed whose backs are, in Thurman's words, "against the wall."

In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman asks the following question:

Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically – and therefore effectively – with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion or to a basic weakness in the religion itself?

(From "Christianity and Racial Justice" Study Guide accompanying *Backs Against the Wall: the Howard Thurman Story* by Journey Films)

Contemplate

Should the church confess its sin of complicity with racism?

Does confession absolve the church of guilt?

How can confession lead to repentance and transformation?

4. Thurman: Most Segregated Hour

The Equal Justice Initiative identifies the location of the picture of robed Klansmen as a Baptist church in Portland, Oregon (1922). **Reflect** further on the image and its significance here.

<https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-racial-segregation-in-church/>

Reflect further from the writings of Thurman:

The Church is divisive and discriminating, even within its fellowship. It is divided into dozens of splinters. This would indicate that it is essentially sectarian in character. ...Here we come upon the shame of what is meant by the phrase of a certain minister in referring to the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning as "the great and sacred hour of segregation." (Essential Writings, 77; The Creative Encounter, 139)

American Christianity has betrayed the religion of Jesus almost beyond redemption. Churches have been established for the underprivileged, the weak, the poor on the theory they prefer to be among themselves. Churches have been established for the Chinese, the Japanese, the Korean, the Mexican, the Filipino, the Italian and the Negro with the same theory in mind. The result is that in the one place in which normal, free contacts might be most naturally established - in which the relations of the individual to his God should take priority over conditions of class, race, power, status, wealth or the like - this place is one of the chief instruments for guaranteeing barriers. (Jesus and the Disinherited 98)

Consider

How does your experience of the church reflect or differ from Thurman's?

Has your primary experience been that of a place which fosters inclusion and community beyond the boundaries of race? Or has it been more along the lines that Thurman delineates - a place that actually fosters and sustains barriers between people?

If the latter is the case, what makes it so?

(From: "Racial Reconciliation and the Church; Lessons from Howard Thurman: A Discussion Guide for Congregations and Small Groups" to accompany the Journey Films production *Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story*)

Contemplate

Are we hopelessly locked into "the great and sacred hour of segregation"?

What would you be willing to do in order to break that tradition?

Kindle your hope by viewing again the reality of the Fellowship Church for All People (*beginning at about 38:24 in Backs Against the Wall and continuing until 41:12*).

<https://vimeo.com/300504888/6ed348db8f>

5. How does the Church Witness to Culture?

In the years leading up to the Civil War, continuing through the decade of Reconstruction, and throughout the era of Jim Crow, the church, especially the southern church, echoed the world that surrounded it. Christians used scriptural texts to condone slavery. They endorsed a God-ordained worldview that placed the savage African beneath and forever subordinate to the white man. And they considered the church to be a spiritual haven in a hostile world. Its role was to guard the hearts and souls of its people, not to be a voice in the public square.

Today's church is different. **Reflect** on the statement issued by Dr. Brian Blount, president of Union Presbyterian Seminary (Richmond), following the death of George Floyd. A portion is quoted below. You can read it in its entirety [here](https://www.upsem.edu/newsroom/statement-from-president-blount-on-the-death-of-george-floyd/).

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Why does our country need white Christians to witness more than they are? More now even than black Christians and black people of every faith and of no faith?

Whether it's individual acts of brutality or systemic oppression, it is hard to maneuver successfully for change when your hands are shackled, your legs are taken out from beneath you, and someone is kneeling on your neck. You need the people who wield economic, political, police, and military power to reign in the agents they have authorized to act on their behalf, to rain down change upon the systems their forebears have spent centuries erecting. To privilege themselves.

You need them to witness.

Not just spiritually. Tangibly. Not just with well-intentioned prayer. With concrete action. Not just from the pulpit and in the sanctuary. Out in the world, on the streets of their cities, in the corridors of their power.

No, this evil of enduring American racism is not just a Christian problem. But for a people who claim to follow a Jesus who died on a cross for all people, and whom we claim reigns in heaven interceding with God for all people, it is an evil we must especially engage. We cannot claim to witness to this risen Christ and simultaneously allow our country's descent into this racial abyss.

We Christian people can make a difference. We must help defeat this draconian, systemic evil. By our witness. Before it is too late.

Contemplate

How can the church effectively engage the world?

Is it primarily through the education and spiritual nurture of its members, who in turn impact their worlds?

In this moment, is the church called to a greater witness? What might that be?