

Could He Have Turned Back?

Courage
Depicted
in the Life of
John
Perkins

Treasures of Wheaton presentation, May 10, 2003

The images below follow the sequence and location of their use during the presentation. Links to audio files of the interview excerpts are available through the headphone icon. Click here to listen to the 11-minute [continuous compilation of the featured Perkins interview excerpts](#)

This morning we are looking at the lives and stories of several people through the lens of courage. How do you tend to think about courage? For myself, I think I see it as too rare, either as something which suddenly coalesces, BOOM!, you're doing the courageous thing, or as something I'm not likely to exhibit even if ever given the chance. John Perkins' life gives us a different view of courage, maybe a more everyday view even if it had its more momentous manifestations. Perkins has remarked, "I don't put much virtue in what we call heroes. I think heroes are people who find themselves in circumstances, they can do no other. That becomes what they have to do." So, I've titled my presentation "Could He Have Turned Back?"

And so I don't put
much virtue so much in
what we call heroes.
I think heroes are people
who find themselves in
circumstances they can do
no other. That becomes
what they have to do.



This presentation and archival materials from Wheaton Archives & Special Collections are for the enjoyment and education of Wheaton College students, scholars, and the public. Materials may be protected by copyright and any use, publication, or duplication is strictly prohibited without written permission.

One of the ways we in the Graham Center Archives help preserve the story of evangelism and missions is by conducting oral histories where people tell us their story, describing their early life, conversion, evangelistic outreach or missionary work, and the context in which all that occurred. I did that with Perkins in June 1987, where I asked him questions and he unfolded his story. There are many different ways to approach the task of retelling a story like this. I'm going to do that through the vehicle of excerpts from that interview with Perkins to tell his story. In preparing for this presentation, I've had the chance to listen again to the interview I did him. What still impresses me is his resilience in the context of difficulties and his sense of purpose and integrity.



Photo File: Perkins, John

The outline of Perkins' life, ministry and influence is perhaps well known, and so I will only sketch it out briefly, letting Perkins' own comments from his oral history do some of the story telling to illustrate the world he grew up in and then helped shape. The American South is a major character in the story, but the point is not to beat up on Southerners since the sin of racism is a human rather than regional problem.

Perkins was born in 1930 and grew up on a plantation in rural Mississippi. His mother died before his first birthday, and he was raised by his paternal grandmother. Within the web of his cousins and uncles he contributed to the family's gambling and bootlegging enterprise. Listen to these two excerpts as he remembers the signals he was getting from the world around him.



PERKINS: We lived on a plantation, and...and we lived...we knew we lived on that plantation. We knew who was the boss. We knew his kids. And so, we knew that our aunts worked in the kitchen and cooked. We knew that we went around to the back door for any conversation we had. That was just a revelation that came with you as you grew up and you knew it was there and you knew it was unjust. But [pauses]...so it was...but that's the way the system was. I mean, it was not a...a blanket revelation that I grew up and discovered it.

I remember one day, when I was a little boy [pauses]. A little white boy had a BB gun. And [pauses]...and he was going along, and he was just calling us niggers. That was...that was always a bad word. That was always an inflammatory word for a white person to say, although they said it all the time. You know, they said it all the time. It became a...a part of them like cursing, but since we were so low on this totem pole that they would say it behind your back and in your face.



This presentation and archival materials from Wheaton Archives & Special Collections are for the enjoyment and education of Wheaton College students, scholars, and the public. Materials may be protected by copyright and any use, publication, or duplication is strictly prohibited without written permission.

He then talked about resisting this racist system, rebelling against the injustice he lived in the center of, even rebelling against the ease with which he and his family exploited their white customers:



PERKINS: Inwardly we rebelled against, as I said, that exploitation of how we exploited people and why we would exploit people. I think we rebelled against that. We also revel...belled against other people that were trying to exploit us. And we'd think that was the most difficult thing. I mean, that was the hardest thing. I

think people who tried to take advantage of us was met with strong resistance from...from us. [Pauses] I remember that Jimmy and I went on a strike [laughs]. I'm...'member two times as a...as a...as a...you know, we didn't know anything about unions. But I remember one time we was cutting paper wood for a guy, and we realized what he was getting for the paper wood and what we was getting for cutting it, and that...and we demanded...in fact, we tried to demand more and he actually fired us [laughs]. He actually fired us.

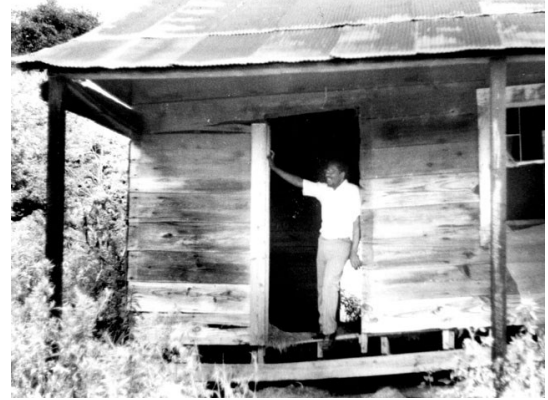


Photo File: Perkins, John

Paper wood, in case you're wondering, is lumber cut to be processed into paper.

Perkins grew up, and as a seventeen-year-old he left to start over in California in 1947 after his brother was killed by a local policeman. He was drafted into the Army in 1951. After serving in Okinawa, he returned to California, which became the place where Perkins encountered Jesus in 1957. Perkins himself says he was looking for love and affirmation, and he found a shadow of it in the company he worked for whose approval brought some security to him. But Perkins contrasts this security with the impact of encountering God's love for him:



Photo File: Perkins, John



PERKINS: I think I found that love in Christ. I...I think the Gospel [pauses] was the love of God made visible to me in the sense that I realized that God loved me. I realized I was loved by God. And if a God in heaven loves me, and if this God who is creator and Lord of the universe love me, then I'm loved by a very significant person. I'm...and...and that that person who loves me that much [pauses] loves me enough to be concerned about my wellbeing. I think I would have thought of love before I was converted as being [pauses] if my company loved me, if I worked hard to be loved by my company, then I realized that my country...my company would...would give me the security I needed in life. And so, my love meant

my security. Okay? I understood that. And I think when I recognized and transferred that to God, that gave me a lot of security.

As Perkins grew as a young Christian, he shared that faith with others. He immediately became involved in a program to share the gospel with children, was instrumental in forming the Fisherman's Gospel Crusade, and joined an outreach to juveniles in prison. A return visit to Mississippi served to generate the conviction to leave California, and overruling the objections of his wife Vera Mae, the family returned to Mississippi in 1960. This clearly was a pivotal choice in Perkins' life. He was leaving the satisfaction and security of a settled life to return to what he had tried to put behind him. How did he feel about returning to Mississippi?



PERKINS: There was an excitement that was coming with it. There was a challenge, there was a fear. And [pauses]...now a challenge and fear. You would have to know me that...and you'd have to know my kids to a certain degree, [pauses] that...and that maybe with a lot of people. I love challenge and fear. I [pauses]...I don't fear...fear.

Listening to him tell it in this next excerpt, you can almost overlook that he could have easily and understandably chosen to stay put in California.



PERKINS: And so, I think, that as I thought about going back to Mississippi as a boy and all of the...and what it was like, and as I think I meditated on my job, about what it was like in Mississippi as a boy and the...and the...and the agony and the poverty and the fact that I had been down there maybe a year before and had saw these conditions down there, I think that I said, "I wanna go back, I wanna go back." I think I said, "I wanna go back there and live among my people [pauses] and be there." And I think I went back there with the idea of just sharing the Gospel. I don't know whether I went back [pauses]...I think I thought that the Gospel would bring people the kind of excitement for achievement, but I don't know if that was a part of...of what I thought about. So, I did not come back to Mississippi with a "wholistic" concept of the gospel. I think I found it after I got back here.

What he found when he returned to Mississippi was more than the deprivation and abuse and discrimination he had left. He found families and students and marriages and growing children (including his own) and the elderly, whose needs defied being

compartmentalized. He saw the spiritual component running through the lives and circumstances of all of these. He came wanting to share his faith but as he lived in and became part of the community, he created a Voice of Calvary Ministries which reconfigured the lines between evangelism and social involvement.



Photo File: Perkins, John



PERKINS: And that...that has been a custom of mine. I mean, I've...I've had a...I've had a...I've had a...had a record of...a history of...of trying to do things that...that was impossible, and bringing th...people together. But I think it was also the beginning of a [pauses]...of a [pauses]...of shaping a philosophy that was more [pauses]...more wholistic. I think that we could see that...that...that...that [pauses] fundamentalism and its "Jesus saves only" type deal was not radical enough for the problems that we was dealing with, and that people did need training, they did need skills, they did need jobs. So...so I...I...I really think that we was able to see that just being merely fundamentalist Bible believing Christians, which we are, but to do that in the fundamental sense of the word and to use the same style and the same method that suburbia churches use, was not adequate for the problem that we had down here.

What emerged from his determination and passion was a proliferation of ministries in the 1960s. As soon as he got to Mississippi, he and Vera Mae began summer Bible classes for community children and then during the school year held them in the area public schools. After relocating from his hometown of New Hebron to nearby Mendenhall, they launched more Bible classes, as well as Sunday schools and Youth for Christ meetings, and evangelistic tent meetings for the whole community. Other programs sprouted: Voice of Calvary Bible Institute, educational opportunities for young people, the Berean Bible Church, a childcare center that later became a part of the Head Start program, the registration of area black voters, the Leadership

Development Program, and the Federation of Southern Co-ops, which was followed by a housing co-op, farmers' co-op, and a cooperative store.

In 1967 the Perkinses also participated in the struggle against segregated schools in Mississippi by sending two of their children as the first black students to enroll in Mendenhall's previously all-white public high school.

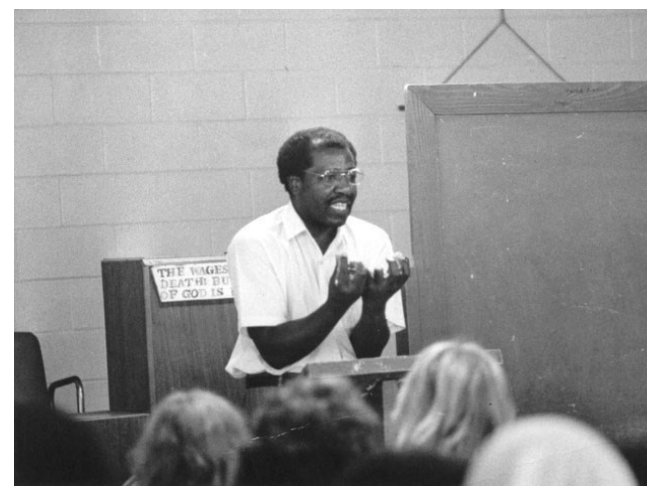
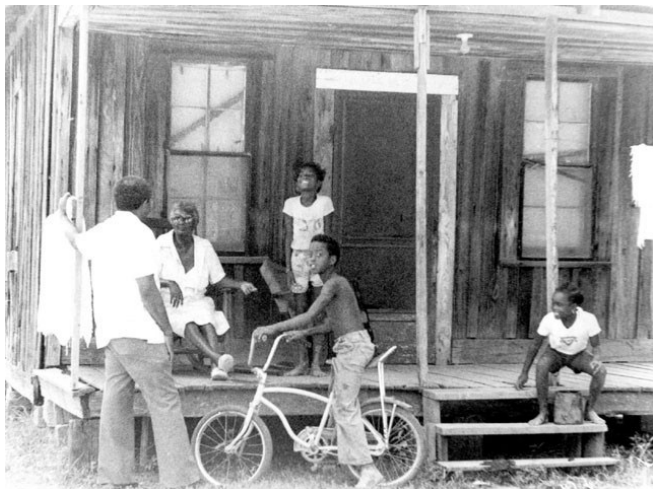
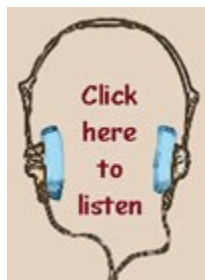


Photo File: Voice of Calvary Ministries; Photo File: Voice of Calvary Ministries – Events & Conferences

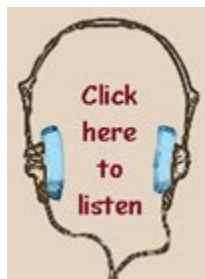
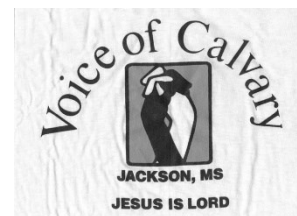
A second pivotal moment in Perkins' life came in late-1969 in Mendenhall. As Perkins says in his book, *Let Justice Roll Down*, "Ever since blacks had started agitating in the early '60s, white hatred had been rising and rising. Now it was finally spilling over, like water breaking through a dam." (Justice: 135) When he and a few others were arrested and held without charges, he launched a boycott of white Mendenhall businesses during the Christmas shopping season. He was released but two months later in February 1970, Perkins and other picketers were arrested and the

beating he received in jail almost ended his life. He was released and recovered, but this kind of beating takes more than physical mending. Seeing no bitterness as I interviewed him, I asked whether he forgave quickly.



PERKINS: And so, I think heavily mistakes is sin. And...and I th...I think I was able to see that...that I had made heavy mistakes, and that was sin. And that [pauses]...and that I needed my sins forgiven. I think that [pauses] hate [pauses]...coming back into [pauses] the Mississippi society from the hospital, I think I had reached the place where...that I basically could not come back and live again and go forward in work with hate. I think I really had to get that hate out of me in order to go forward. And so, I think I learned the meaning of the forgiveness of sin. And [pauses] I [pauses]...I don't know whether or not we as Christians today have enough [pauses]...put enough emphasis on the forgiveness of sin. I...I think that we have a...again, I think that we have sort of organized sin to be so light and there's so many mistakes that it's not even necessary to ask fo...to go through a process of forgiveness. There's no need for repentance. And...and...and so sin is covered over too lightly. And so, I...I...I...I...I...and I...and...and...I...I think because of that, too, we don't have the vibrant energy that we need because we don't sense that we've been forgiven. You understand? So that I think when you can sense that you've been forgiven, I think it give you a new energy to go forward in...in...in...in life. And so I...I...I think that I...on that hospital bed, I think, going through that period, that I needed the forgiveness of sin to enter back into the world with a...with some push to make a difference in society. That was a hard process for me.

Perkins relocated to Jackson, where he resumed his many-pronged ministry and began to explore the implications of what was a developing philosophy of ministry, this time in an urban context. Educational programs, home renovation, community advocacy, a medical clinic, and more. But his tackling social problems and human needs never sidelined his commitment to the gospel. In this excerpt Perkins talks about arriving at a meeting of local leaders to plan for Billy Graham's upcoming 1975 crusade in Jackson.



PERKINS: And they was talking about how the Crusade was gonna to be conducted and that kind of thing, and they really wanted black participation in the crusade. And I...and I got up and I said, "You know, I'm...it's pretty exciting that...the possibility of Dr. Graham coming to this city," and I said, "I...I...I know that when he speaks, that...that people are gonna to go forward and make confessions of faith. And [pauses]...and I suspect that I'll be sitting on the platform." And I said [pauses], "I don't know whether or not I want to participate in making the same kind of white Christians that we've had in the past," I said, "because what will happen is that some of our young folk will probably go to your church, and...and you will turn them down." And I said, "And they would have seen me sitting on the platform would give them the assumption that I agree with that. And...and I don't know if I want to participate in that.

Perkins did participate in that crusade and characterized it as a wonderful turning point in Mississippi history.

All throughout this time and since, Perkins was speaking locally and around the country, writing books and articles, and serving on the boards of other Christian ministries. The ministry model he formulated, which has been implemented by others throughout the country, can be summed up as the Three Rs: Relocation, Reconciliation and Redistribution.

Perkins still serves in areas of need in black and white communities, while also challenging and collaborating with white Christians and churches to extend the reach of his dream.

Our purpose this morning isn't simply to isolate and memorialize three contributors to the growth of God's Kingdom. These are three people whose stories are told in the documents in our collections here at the College and we are honored to be stewards of them. If you come to our archives, you can read letters or listen to audio tapes or study photographs which these three created or gathered which now help tell their story. You don't have to just take it from us. You don't have to settle just for the few bits we have had the time to share with you this morning. It is from our larger collections that we are sharing these treasures this morning. The entire John Perkins interview is available on our Web site as both audio files and transcripts. You will find a handout at the back which includes our home page and a brief description of the Perkins collection, and this presentation will be available there in the next several days.

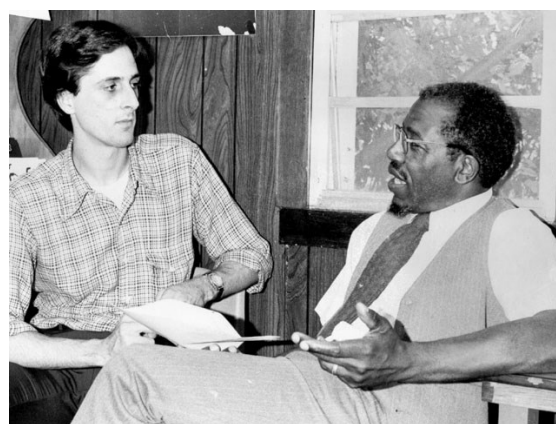


Photo File: Perkins, John



Perkins is the one of our three featured figures who is still living. He continues to speak, sharing his dream. He doesn't persuade everyone, but hope leaves those things to God. I suggest that it was in the forge of these circumstances that Perkins' character was not only made but revealed. We see pieces of it being cultivated as he grew up among grandparents, his cousins and uncles and aunts. It received new life as

he chose the way of Christian faith and discipleship. And it was cultivated further as he lived out his faith in the context of the Voice of Calvary community and the great needs around him in Mississippi.

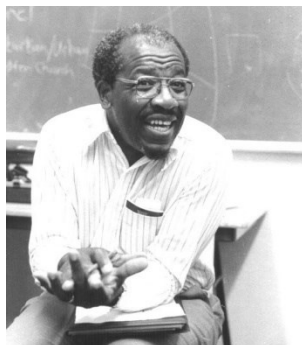


Photo File: Perkins, John

What we see is the humble and hopeful character which rings true and stirs in us the awareness of what God can accomplish in a person who cares little for their own safety or reputation. Maybe to our surprise Perkins doesn't characterize what he has done as remarkable or a great credit to him. The circumstances, the love of God in his heart, and his convictions allowed him no other choice. And so, he returned to the Mississippi he had run from, he led the boycott in Mendenhall, and helped contribute to the ongoing transformation of American Christianity. Let's hear him one last time as he sums up the activity of his life.



PERKINS: And so I don't put much virtue in...in...so much in what we call heroes. I think heroes are people who find themselves in circumstances they can do no other. That becomes what they have to do. And so [pauses] they...I think that [pauses]...I think if I'd been killed in the Brandon jail, I would have been forgotten.

Listen to the full interview with John Perkins in three parts:

- [T1](#) (65 minutes)
- [T2](#) (65 minutes)
- [T3](#) (20 minutes)

Or explore photographs, records, and other documents of Perkin's life and ministry in [Collection 367: Papers of John Perkins](#) and [Collection 362: Records of the Voice of Calvary Ministries](#).

And so I don't put much virtue so much in what we call heroes. I think heroes are people who find themselves in circumstances they can do no other. That becomes what they have to do.

