

Speeches presented on October 28, 2010, by Gov. William Winter and Rev. John Perkins at an event hosted by Mission Mississippi in their honor

Rev. John Perkins

I want to thank Mission Mississippi and all of you for this evening. I think all of us –they say there are three needs that define us human beings, three basic needs. One is the need to be loved and, as a part of that love, to belong and to be a part of. So it's great. The second need is the need for significance, to feel significant, to belong, to be loved, to feel significant. The third need is the need for a reasonable amount of security. That's what defines us from the other animal kingdom and others. And of course then to be loved and accepted, to feel secure in your own hometown, your own home state, to be accepted, really glorious. Of all the honors, and I get a lot of them, but this one stands out. It stands out because of the leadership of people like William Winter. They say a leader is a person who can turn vision to passion, and people follow passion. I remember when he was running for governor, against John Bell Williams in about 1966. John Bell Williams reshaped himself as a resurrected Bilbo, probably the worst governor we ever had. William Winter, even when he could see that he was going to lose in terms of race, he never stooped. He lost the governorship but it laid the foundation for four years later, as Mississippi changed and we became more enfranchised, when he became governor.

I can remember when he came to New Hebron, the place where my brother was killed and the place where there was not adequate health care. He came to Mendenhall, to New Hebron, to dedicate our health center down there, to pull off his shirt, and to interact with the people. This was the first time that black people in rural MS had ever been able to shake a governor's hand, in the midst of people of all races who were there. Then he came a few months later to Jackson, when we were opening a second health center, and he did the same. Then he said something to me that made me know that he was a leader. He said, "John Perkins, if you were me, if you were a governor, what would you do?" Because people had this idea that black folks had created the welfare system. It wasn't five black congressmen, when white people created that deadly system that undermined our dignity and kept a segregated system going and then fought us for doing that in our society.

He said, "What would you do? What would you do?" I said, "I would go to the Delta of Mississippi and spend eight or ten days living in the homes and visiting the people and telling the black folks and everybody else what the government can't do for them but how we could partner together to make a difference." A few weeks later, I heard that Governor Winter was going to the Delta to interact with people in the Delta. What makes a leader and what makes a leader dynamic is the quality of life of the led. Most of us think a leader is someone who is self-exalted and has all of this superficial charisma. But a leader is known by the

quality of life of the led. Every other criteria doesn't count. It's the quality and it's the led who can hear their voice in the voice of the leader. That's what makes a leader. That's what made John Kennedy: Ask not what America can do for you but what you can do for America. He wasn't promising us anything, he was calling for something out of us, because we are created in the image of God in our society. And so Governor Winter's being friends with him and being partners with him has been a very mutual situation.

The last thing I'd like to say here—they always hate for me to speak because I speak too long, I know that. The question you really would like to know I think if I were you, how have I been able to survive for fifty years? In particular, how could I survive with Vera May for 59 years? I think that what happened to me when I returned to MS in 1960 from California—My wife always accuses me of this when I get too hard on people. I almost made it, I almost broke the cycle of poverty in California. Then that's when my young son invited me to a good news club and for the first time in my life I heard that there was a God in heaven who loved me dearly and who sent his son to die for me. That was the motivation that brought me back to Mississippi.

I got back in 1960, and I think what drives me along, in Mendenhall, where I started my life's work, I got to know a white pastor, First Baptist pastor. That was difficult in those days because white people would have been afraid to interact with a black person like me. But somehow or another, probably because it was the first time he had met a black and got to know him, that understood theology as well as him. I think relationships have to see value in each other. If you can't see value in another person, you're going to treat him in a patronizing way. There's gotta be something within that person that brings a sense of equality, in their behavior, in their relationship to someone. An inferior cannot be reconciled to a superior. It's only as they see each other as equal in the eyes of God that the relationship really begins. Reconciliation assumes equality. That's what makes it so tough. Imperialism has damaged white folks. Inferiority has damaged us, so we don't look at each other as equals.

What happened to me was, I became friends with this white gentleman, which as I say was very difficult. We became friends because we valued each other. I began to tell him about the inequities which he already knew. Poverty was just being discovered in Mississippi so it was easy to go through the statistics. He wanted to help me. It wasn't a threat, it was basically him supporting and interacting with what we were doing in Mendenhall. He really wanted to do that, and, like any good pastor would do, he would go back and begin to share this with his congregation. When he began to do that, the congregation rejected him. My friend couldn't take that rejection and he committed suicide.

That's when I began to see what had happened to white America and white people. That's when I began to see that we were damaged equally. Imperialism and power destroyed us both, and the healing had to be both of us. That's when I

began to see what had happened. We had taken this wonderful gospel that's the love of God, that's supposed to burn through racial and cultural barriers, we had taken that gospel and put it into our race and our religion in a way that the gospel had lost its power. What we had was a form of religion that denied the power of God. That's when I began to say that I want to preach a gospel that is stronger than my economic interests, my selfishness.

Let me close with this. In *Amazing Grace*, the guy who broke originally the slave barrier was William Wilberforce. Wilberforce gave forty years, his whole life, and he could have been Prime Minister. But he said, "I will not be Prime Minister of a slave state." He gave his life to the development of manner, proper behavior, and also to eliminating slavery. That was his brilliant contribution. He gave forty years to that task. At the end of *Amazing Grace* is a line that absolutely so beautiful, just when he had all the votes in the parliament. Of course Gladstone, the Prime Minister, had this vision he was going to die. So he was pushing Wilberforce to act, act. Also there was Newton, the *Amazing Grace* guy, who was pushing him to act. He had the votes, and he said, "Act! We got the votes. We can free people from slavery." Wilberforce said, "We got the votes but what about the king?" Gladstone said, "Don't worry about the king; he's insane." Let me tell you what insanity is, insanity is to know what's right and have the power to do right but don't have the will to do what's right. That's insanity. We are living in a day of insanity. What drove Nebuchadnezzar to insanity was that he had to put Daniel in the lion's den. He had the power.

One of the problems we are suffering from today is that we have deified money. We have deified money and power. Whoever we get next week will be the best congressmen that money can buy. We have deified power. They can't do much for you because the most they can do is raise money to get power. Yes we made a lot of progress but I want you to know that we are standing at an opportune time in our history. There is a new small emerging group of people who is ready to throw off, I call them post-racists, small majority, but I don't know whether or not we have the will. I'm beginning to believe that what Mission Mississippi is wonderful, what Stewpot is doing is wonderful, and what Habitat for Humanity is doing is wonderful. I'm afraid that it's too little too late. I think we think that money is a solution. What I'm suffering from in Jackson is the moral failure of our church to deliver. The death and violence in this town and the poverty is becoming greater. There are some bright spots but I want you to know that the crime is going to more severe because of the drop out rate. The school is not delivering, and the church is going big but indifferent to the problem. Its too little too late, and the children don't need your money. What the children need is some love and some compassion and some nurture. This includes me. We are the richest senior generation, black and white, to ever walk on this planet. We are not utilizing our resources, not our resources, but our person to be in these schools, these elementary schools, reading to these children, mentoring these children. I'm giving the remainder of my life to that because the problem is amoral problem. The problem is a spiritual problem. It's not an economic problem

altogether that's causing this kids to rob these banks and to kill each other in our society. The church is getting big and mega and moving the people away from the problem. While the people are killing each other and dying in our community that lacks a moral and spiritual fabric.

I just pray that organizations like Mission Mississippi --and I don't think we're going to do it one relationship at a time. Jesus didn't do that. Jesus taught to the multitude. We are afraid to manage the multitude. There's never been a revolution on earth that wasn't the multitude. Jesus manages the multitude. Moses managed the multitude. Nelson Mandela managed the multitude. Gandhi managed the multitude. So this one relationship at a time is not adequate. It's too little. too late. We've got to get a multitude of people committed to Mission Mississippi and committed to these ministries here in Mississippi that have already shown the light that we can do better. Thank you for listening.

Gov. William Winter

I cannot possibly express to you what it means to me to stand hereon this stage and be the recipient of this recognition--but what is more difficult for me to understand is how I can possibly be entitled to stand here by the side of one of my heroes, Dr. John Perkins.

I am reminded of the story that they tell about the time when Michael Jordan, the great basketball star of the Chicago Bulls scored 73 points against Detroit. After the game a reporter was interviewing some of Jordan's teammates about the game. One of them was a young rookie substitute guard who had scored one field goal. They asked him for his comments on the game.

He was obviously very excited about it. He said, "I'll remember this game as long as I live. I'll remember it as the game when Michael Jordan and I scored 75 points."

Well I'll remember this night as long as I live, too. I'll remember it as the night John Perkins and I were recognized together. He and I scored 75 points, but he scored 73 of them. I am glad to bask in his glory. So I hope you will appreciate what it means to me as an old white ex-governor to have the privilege to be a part of this evening honoring Dr. Perkins and me and to be with so many of you who have done so much more than I have to promote racial equity and justice in our society.

I would like to think about this occasion as one where we have come together to celebrate the progress that we have made. It has not been too many years when it would have been unthinkable to have a gathering like this in Jackson, Mississippi. The police would have us all arrested. I vividly remember those days as so many of you do.

The truth of the matter is that we had all been prisoners of a system that enslaved us all- blacks and whites alike. When I was governor, we had a dinner in memory of Medgar Evers. At the conclusion, I said to Myrlie Evers, the widow

of the slain leader, "Mrs. Evers, we white folks owe almost as much to your martyred husband as black folks do. For, you see, he helped free us, too. He made it possible for me as governor to join you here in the Mississippi Governor's Mansion to pay tribute to his life and work." I can say the same thing about John Perkins. Thank you, John, for helping free me.

Tonight, we come together to celebrate the emerging transition of our region from those old dark and bitter days of racial oppression and discrimination to a place where openness and opportunity for everyone is now being established - where in the words of Dr. John Hope Franklin's monumental book, we have now moved so far from slavery toward freedom.

But the tragedy is that this process has taken so long. One hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed we were still denying black people the basic freedoms guaranteed by the United States Constitution.

It was to help make up for all of that lost time that John Perkins spent his life. He has in his dedicated and dignified way tried to get all of us to do the right thing—of simply living up to the tenets of our Christian faith. That is what the Voice of Calvary is all about. That is what Mission Mississippi is all about.

But there is still a lot of unfinished business to attend to before we attain a truly just and equitable society.

Because the world has gotten so much smaller and our country has gotten more racially diverse, it is obvious that our capacity to exist as a great nation will depend on how well we learn to live together and to be united by shared values. A beginning point in this process may be a simple recognition that we do not and probably cannot see many issues from the same perspective. How far we think we have come in race relations depends largely on where we stand. Most white people think we have come further than most people of other races think we have.

What I believe all of us can agree on though, is that racial prejudice and racist speech and action must be considered outside the bounds of acceptable conduct in our society; that the elimination of the remaining areas of racial injustice must be a matter of individual commitment as well as national priority; and that we must work to eliminate the social, educational and economic conditions that contribute to unequal opportunities.

A democratic society cannot leave these problems to be solved by blind chance or individual impulse. We must work at it together. There must be a shared vision that recognizes our mutual interdependence. This vision must be transmitted to all of our fellow Americans and particularly to our young people, and all of us must be involved in transmitting that vision.

A special challenge lies in the educational and economic advancement of people who have been left behind. We must get the message out to every household and especially every poor household that the only road out of poverty runs by the schoolhouse. Discrimination is not limited to race. The line that separates the well-educated from the poorly educated may be the harshest fault line of all. This is where we must increasingly concentrate our efforts.

We have to start by eliminating or at least improving the social and living conditions that contribute to poor learning. Because we know that so much

mental development takes place at a very early age, we are going to have to step up our early childhood education efforts and reach more children from have-not households while there is still time.

I am aware of the commitment to the cause of racial justice that so many of you here tonight have held for a long time. I am also aware of our natural tendency to become discouraged because of the immense complexity of the task. But this is not a mission for the faint hearted or the short winded. Now more than ever our continued unflagging commitment is required—the kind of commitment that John Perkins personified. I had the privilege several years ago of serving on President Bill Clinton’s Commission on Race. Dr. John Hope Franklin was the distinguished chair of that Commission. Our group met with people of every background in 26 states.

Here is what everybody agreed on:

- (1) Everybody wanted their children to get an adequate education.
- (2) They wanted a fair opportunity to get a sustaining job.
- (3) They wanted to live in a decent house on a safe street.
- (4) They wanted access to good health care.
- (5) And above all else they wanted to be treated with dignity and respect.

Why then can't we come together around a commitment to see that these reasonable and common aspirations are realized by more of our fellow citizens. If we can unite to achieve these objectives, I believe that the superficial differences of race — of what we look like — will fade away as a basis for division and misunderstanding.

At the risk of seeming presumptuous, let me suggest that there is a huge continuing mission here for those of us in this room tonight who represent a tremendous reservoir of intellectual, spiritual and economic resources of this community and our state.

We must continue that mission that was inspired a long time ago by Dr. John Perkins and those whom he has inspired—Dolphus Weary, Neddie Winters—the Voice of Calvary and Mission Mississippi and that is now being sustained by them. So tonight as we acknowledge the debt that we owe Dr. Perkins and those other leaders, let us remember how we can repay that debt. It is not enough that we express it in words, or indeed, in this impressive occasion this evening. We can do it only by our unflagging efforts — in our homes, in the places where we work, in the churches and social gatherings and civic clubs and community networks where so much opinion is shaped, indeed, in all of the relationships of our lives — to make our community, our state and our country places where at long last everyone can look forward to a life of achievement and dignity and where nobody gets left out.

That is what Dr. John Perkins has taught us to do. I am greatly honored to stand here with him and to express my appreciation to Mission Mississippi and to all of you for this great honor.