

Baptists urge Wal-Mart to practice Golden Rule

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By Hannah Elliott

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DALLAS (ABP)—Wal-Mart, the self-styled low-price leader, can't seem to get a break these days. While the giant retailer has recently come under attack from pro-gay groups for backpedaling on diversity initiatives, a group of Baptist pastors and leaders has spoken against Wal-Mart for exploiting workers in order to increase profits.

Robert Parham, executive director of the [Baptist Center for Ethics](#), recently lead the charge against Wal-Mart on national TV. He appeared Dec. 15 on [CNBC's On The Money](#) to discuss a letter and television ad in which Joe Phelps, pastor of [Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky.](#), demanded the retailer adhere to the Golden Rule—Jesus' command to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

The TV ad, which aired Dec. 14 in 25 states and 43 markets, was funded by the union-backed [WakeUpWalMart.com](#). The group accuses the company of gender-based discrimination, child-labor law violations, and failure to provide health care to workers.

Parham appeared on CNBC opposite Ira Combs, pastor of Greater Bible Way of the Apostolic Faith in Jackson, Mich., who defended Wal-Mart for its history of creating jobs and providing inexpensive goods in low-income neighborhoods.

On the show, Parham said Jesus would be “more concerned about health care for the children of Wal-Mart employees than low prices.”

“When we celebrate Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, who gave us the moral imperative, the Golden Rule, and ... we believe that the Golden Rule challenges American consumers to think about where they should shop,” he said in the interview, which is archived on CNBC’s website.

Parham said all people of faith affirm the value of the Golden Rule, so Wal-Mart should “strive to be a Golden Rule company — not follow secondary standards and seek only profit for a few.”

Combs responded by pointing out that Wal-Mart is “not running for sainthood” but operates in a capitalist, free-market system. He said the store has become a target simply because it meets consumer needs better than competitors. In a subsequent recap of the event, Parham noted Combs serves on an advisory group recruited by Wal-Mart to counter negative public opinion.

“I think that the problem here is this is not really a theological question and debate, this is really an ideological one, which deals with social and economic issues,” Combs said. He also blamed Parham for philosophy “steeped in a great deal of the union philosophical bent with regard to how these businesses and corporations should operate and carry out their business.”

On the WakeUpWalMart.com TV spot, Phelps asked shoppers: “If these are Wal-Mart’s values, would Jesus shop at Wal-Mart? Should you?”

Apparently, the answer is no. In a column that appeared on ethicsdaily.com, Phelps said shopping at Wal-Mart is “an insult to God. ... What we buy matters to others and to God.”

Phelps said he made the ad to “wake up the American consumer, especially those with Bible values, to the reality that our buying power has real power to affect a lot of people around the world.”

“Everyone wants lower prices, but not at the expense of neighbors who work for Wal-Mart, or people around the world who make their products,” he wrote. “Our purchasing choices are the crucial link in granting companies like Wal-Mart our tacit permission and our financial support to continue practices that exploit the young, the vulnerable, and the working poor.”

A spokeswoman for [Working Families for Wal-Mart](#), a group formed to defend the store, called the ad campaign “shameful,” especially during the holidays. “While the union leaders are wasting their members’ dues on an attack campaign, Wal-Mart is benefiting tens of millions of working families through its low prices and quality job opportunities,” she said in a press statement.

More than 176 million people shop at Wal-Mart each week. The retailer has more than 1.8 million employees worldwide, 1 million of whom have health plans, according to the Wal-Mart website.

Phelps is a board member of the Baptist Center for Ethics, which commissioned a petition letter to the same effect as the TV commercial. The letter, drafted by Parham, was sent in partnership with WakeUpWalMart.com to Wal-Mart CEO Lee Scott. As of Dec. 19, 132 people had signed it, including activist Tony Campolo, seminary professors and many Baptist pastors.

Calling themselves “moral theologians,” the signers said: “We believe that

Wal-Mart has been given and entrusted with much wealth, power and influence,” the letter said. “Wal-Mart’s leaders need to recognize their moral obligations to be good stewards of what the corporation has been given and entrusted, not simply through acts of charity but with justice for working-family employees who have built, but not necessarily benefited, from Wal-Mart’s vast earnings.”

WakeUpWalMart is sponsored by the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union.

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