

I accepted a unique invitation to appear in a 30-second "Wake Up Wal-Mart" commercial. It will appear across the nation on major television networks this Thursday and Friday.

"Wake Up Wal-Mart" (wakeupwalmart.com) is a national campaign that challenges the country's largest retailer to clean up its act on multiple fronts, particularly in matters that adversely affect its 1.4 million employees.

Why would a minister appear in such an ad campaign?

I accepted the chance to speak to millions of Americans because of my pastoral role of evangelist-- one who announces the message of God's agenda as seen in the life of our Savior, Jesus.

The Bible is full of God's passion about the livelihood and welfare of workers, their families, and their communities. At the same time, God also expresses grave concern for employers who exploit their workers. For the God of the Bible, words like peace and truth aren't abstract ideals; they are to be lived out in how we interact with God and each other, not just on Sunday, but every day.

And so my long-standing concerns about Wal-Mart as an employer, a community leader, and a global force prompted me to join those trying to "Wake Up" (the campaign's name) the retail giant to do the right thing. I want Wal-Mart to honestly review if their profit-making has deteriorated into greed and exploitation.

I also want to "wake up" the American consumer, especially those with Bible values, to the reality that our buying power has real power to effect 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. 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.

There are two sides to the Wal-Mart debate, of course. Google "Wal-Mart defense" and you'll find plenty of opinions about how Wal-Mart is good for workers and for our country. Wal-Mart has a major marketing initiative, backed by millions of dollars and a staff of 70, to convince consumers that it is a benevolent corporation. Their arguments remind me of the lawyer reacting to Jesus' instruction to love your neighbor, "But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"

On the other side is a vast collection of data from workers, consumer watch organizations, and investigations that reveals a pattern of exploiting workers in order to cut costs and hike profits.

Those who care will weigh the arguments on both sides, pray, discern and act.

In the ad I ask, "Would Jesus shop at Wal-Mart?" It's admittedly a haughty-sounding question, but one that must be asked. I don't claim to know the answer for everyone. I do, however, think it is a question worth posing.

Some will be offended by the question, or at least by its implication, especially if they draw different conclusions from the evidence. Or if they are staunch supporters of unfettered capitalism. Or if, like me, they've shopped at Wal-Mart in the past with no guilt about finding a desired product at a low price-- especially if it's the only store in town, as is often the case in small towns across America.

Others will be annoyed at the idea that there are connections between the store's low prices, the effect of their employment practices in America, and the effect on the overtime worker in China who earns \$3.45 a day making Wal-Mart products.

Still others will wonder why a minister would worry about Wal-Mart's business practices instead of sticking to the task of saving souls.

A century old Baptist in my church's stained glass windows faced a similar challenge. Walter Rauschenbusch concluded that it was hypocritical for the church to try to save the souls of factory workers if it didn't also support living wages for the workers' families. For him, the two were intrinsically connected.

For me, the answer to "Would Jesus shop at Wal-Mart?" is: Probably not at the present, not with its current business practices. I believe it is an insult to God to say we believe the Golden Rule, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and then purposely ignore the implications of our shopping choices. What we buy matters to others and to God.

And so in the ad I ask viewers to "search your own heart." For me, once I know, I have to say no--especially at Christmas, when we recall Mary's song at the news that she would bear the Savior.

He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly.

Your heart may be at peace with shopping at Wal-Mart. Each of us must follow the Spirit's leading. I'm not qualified to tell you what the Spirit says to you. I can only bear witness, wherever I can, to what the Spirit says to me.

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