

# Jim wallis: taking steps towards truer living



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Refreshing yet practical, Jim Wallis' timely book *Rediscovering Values: On Wall Street, Main Street, and Your Street* provides a taut argument and solution for the current state of the nation. Both readable and challenging to the inner psyche of the reader, Wallis strips down all the extra jargon and maintains a straightforward voice throughout the book. As a bold spokesperson for liberal Christians who merge faith with public and political life, Wallis has inspired many spiritually minded people to break free from the dichotomy of religion and state. Wallis explores the connection between the teachings of Jesus and a levelheaded yet holistic approach to money, morality, and happiness, while exposing the ritual of consumption and the idol we have made of the market. It is his contention that we need to interchange such lifestyles with the practice of mindful citizenship.

At the outset, the 2008-2009 economic crisis seemed to be a devastating turn for most Americans. Yet Wallis reveals the gift veiled in the problem: the opportunity to reclaim our values, as individuals, as families, and as a society. Perhaps even more important than economic restoration is our own moral restoration. Wallis provides a metaphor about the current state of our nation in the form of a three-legged stool. The three components consist of the market sector such as Wall Street, the public sector such as the government, and the civil sector such as churches. Wallis points out that America—as well as the majority of the globe—has permitted the market sector to exercise too much power and influence. Consequently, that particular leg of the stool has become excessively long, resulting in an imbalanced system that will soon topple over. Rather than simply present a staunch, ethical diatribe against the unforgiving narcissism of Wall Street,

Wallis instead focuses most of his energy on signaling the unwise choices made by ordinary citizens, particularly in the way they view and handle their money. In addition, he points to the Church's embarrassingly egregious display of perhaps America's most glaring vice of greed, as well as the CEO of Wal-Mart's annual income of billions of dollars. Wallis more than adequately portrays the dearth of morals and values by the chiefs of countless businesses, as well as dilemma of loss in wages and income inequality. He examines the corrupt redistribution method practiced between the rich even as unemployment and wage loss continue to rise: " Yet today, if anyone questions whether these bonuses are actually deserved and whether we, as taxpayers who financed all of this, should be able to share in any of the profits, they are accused of being a socialist, a communist, or worse" (Wallis 222). He lays down heavy conviction towards the crooked methods of the wealthy and the manipulation of public perception.

Wallis also explores what he calls " the Great Lie," which is a widespread cultural belief that many citizens adhere to without even realizing it. It is belief that purports that " those who are wealthy are so because they are responsible and righteous, and those who are poor must be irresponsible or even immoral [...] It is the belief that great physical riches indicate that God must be pleased with your actions and that poverty suggests God's disfavor and even punishment" (Wallis 90). This is where morality becomes scarily skewed, and those who are most in need of love, mercy and attention are discarded as people who have lost the favor of God through displeasing actions. Here, he continues to shed light on facets of reality which often go unnoticed.

Wallis proposes that we have a more generous outlook, which views every citizen as important and deserving of dignity. Yet right-wing readers, while agreeing that perhaps generosity should be exercised more on a regular basis, may equally argue that this should not be forced or demanded. While conservatives and right-wing individuals may have a difficult time adjusting to Wallis' overtly left views, he also offers understanding and direction for the group of liberal Christians who seek to intersect their spiritual faith with their political convictions and concerns. Gay rights, environmental awareness, and benevolence to the poor are all components of the left-wing mindset, which are often scoffed at by the rigid right-wing. Though indeed extremely liberal in his political persuasion, every individual with an open mind can appreciate the intent of this devout Christian and leader of a spiritual movement.

For some, the simplistic and oftentimes repetitive nature of the book may be a source of dissatisfaction. Wallis's arguments about the error and cause of the recession are not revolutionary and are found in many other authors' writings. The conclusion of the book may have also suffered from lack of effectiveness due to the build-up of the previous chapters. Yet its seeming over-simplicity may in fact be its greatest asset. No reader can cast off the book, claiming that it is inaccessible. In addition, though it could be easy to dismiss the common sense nature of the book, even this supports Wallis' argument, as it highlights the dire state of our nation and its deluded chase after external happiness. He reminds us that, "Simplification is not a commitment to abject poverty but a choice to live more fully" (Wallis 115). He opens the reader's eyes to facets of his modern day existence at may

have been ignored or gone unnoticed. The institutionalized greed, unchecked narcissism, and flagrant consumerism that seem to be invisible pillars in the American pursuit of happiness are completely unveiled in this book. Just that feature alone makes the book necessary to read if one is to unearth the reasons for their spiritual unease and dissatisfaction despite an abundance of material objects and worldly achievements.

The reverend alludes to countless biblical messages and stories in his argument for the moral restoration of the nation. The miracle in which Jesus fed a multitude of five thousand with “ seven loaves and a few small fish” reminded me on a deep, spiritual level of the lasting power of a giving and trusting heart (Matthew 15: 34, NLT). Wallis discusses how one individual had to relinquish his meager supply of food so that Jesus could perform his work. This gently beckons the reader to examine his or her own relationship with possessions, and even necessities such as food, and the hoarding nature with which we selfishly cling to our own. In many cases, especially if we only have enough for ourselves, we would keep the portions while feeling like we were best serving ourselves in the process. What Wallis alludes to here without even saying it, is that the fulfillment, both physical and spiritual, come to us when we are able to let go of what we think we need. This takes faith and a belief in something much bigger than us. Even the most superficial reading of this story can be a reminder to all of us that this is an area where we need to work on.

In his persuasive discussion about the moral dimension of the financial crisis, Wallis uses his adept storytelling and prophetic undertone to expose the prodigal mindset propagated by the worship of markets, as well as the need

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for moral awakening and a newfound dedication to the betterment of all. All throughout the book, Wallis offers generous amounts of hope in the midst of his extensive moral conviction. He reminds us that in the moments when one can most easily fall prey to pain and disappointment, the most opportunity for growth can be found. He beckons us to forgo the temptation to fall into selfish victimhood and to instead focus on the victory that lies before us if we are willing to put in the work. Ultimately, *Rediscovering Values: On Wall Street, Main Street, and Your Street* puts the power back into the hands of the individual and offers both the catalyst for moral rejuvenation as well as the fundamentals of a more spiritually fulfilling public life.