

The Wolf of Wall Street (2013)

Rated R. Running time: 3 hours

Our Advisories(1-10): Violence 2; Language 7; Sex/Nudity 9

Our star rating (1-5): 3

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

Romans 1:28-32

Based on real life Jordan Belfort, the main character of this Wall Street tale of greed certainly is a predator. Isaiah the prophet wrote, "The wolf shall live with the lamb," but Belfort is not ever likely to live with lambs in the harmony envisioned by the prophet. He has divided people into two categories, clever wolves and naive victims deserving to be fleeced.

Serving as narrator, Belfort says with a swagger in his voice, "My name is Jordan Belfort. The year I turned 26, I made 49 million dollars, which really pissed me off because it was three shy of a million a week." This wolf is better described by the apostle Paul in the opening chapter of his Letter to the Romans than by the ancient prophet. As you will see at the

end of the film, this is not a character transformation film, but rather a report from the front lines of the cynicism, greed, and debauchery that constitutes so much of the life of wealthy America today.

Jordan Belfort, skillfully, so exuberantly, played by Leonardo De Caprio, makes Gordon Gekko seem like Francis of Assisi, so engulfed in the lustful life is he. "Greed is good" has been replaced in his life by "Greed is God." He starts out at a high end Manhattan trading firm as "a connector," the initial caller to prospective buyers on a list. Top broker Mark Hanna (Matthew McConaughey), becoming his mentor, teaches him during a long lunch hour at a fancy restaurant, that he is not to work for the customer but for himself—he is not to serve the clients' interest but to extract as much money from them as possible and then move on to the next sucker. He concludes the session by rhythmically beating his fist against his chest while chanting, as if he were some gorilla celebrating a victory in the jungle. Later, when he has formed his own wildly successful penny stock boiler room named Stratton Oakmont, he gets a whole room full of greedy employees to perform this victory ritual, which made me think that the film might just as easily have been called *The Gorilla of Wall Street*.

I won't further describe the plot except to say that later, when the incorruptible FBI agent Patrick Denham (Kyle Chandler), whom Belfort has so taunted and insulted, is closing the noose on him, forcing him to wear a wire to implicate all those working with him, he does show one shred of decency by silently warning his chief acolyte Donnie Azoff (Jonah Hill) not to say anything that would incriminate him. But that is it, as we see him next giving a powerful pep talk to his employees: so charismatic is he in creating an atmosphere of group think and acting that they burst forth in wild dancing, cheers, and praise, not knowing that soon most of them will be arrested and charged with financial crimes

based on evidence supplied by their supposed benefactor.

Director Martin Scorsese and screenwriter Terrence Winter make no judgments about Belfort and his greedy followers. Judging by the reaction of many in the audience, some approve of his cleverness, laughing at the scenes of excessive sex, drug sniffing, and clever seduction of people gullible enough to believe the wild promises of wealth from a stranger calling them on their telephone. (And also look at the large number of Americans calling themselves Christian who petitioned A&E to restore to their popular show the homophobic and racist they had dropped!)

Long gone are the days of the old Hayes office when the gangster films of the time were required to show that "crime does not pay." Our anti-hero in this film is sentenced to four years for security fraud, but have you seen the palatial prison quarters that he and others of the ruling class are sent to? Our's is a society in which even in prison wealth and power rule. Out in almost half the sentenced time, Belfort is barred from a career in financial wheeling/dealing, but he is still raking in money as a motivational speaker. For more on this and a link to an interesting article on Belfort's numerous victims ""Investors' Story Left Out of Wall Street Movie," go to [Spirituality and Practice](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/films.php?id=25760). (at <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/films.php?id=25760>) Indeed, if you are not familiar with Mary Ann and Frederic Brussat's invaluable film and literature website, I encourage you to bookmark it for frequent reference: harking back to the days when church leaders judged "godless movies" from a moralistic standpoint, they are pioneers in seeing film through the lens of spirituality

There are so many scenes of full nudity and sexual intercourse, of cocaine snuffing, and gutter language that it is doubtful that a church leader would use the film in a group. Perhaps the sickest scene is not of expensive call girls engaging in group sex, but the one in which tBelfort and

his employess lift up a helmeted dwarf and toss him at a large target, those hitting the bullseye receiving a reward. Therefore the few questions that I'll append in the journal will be more for reflection than discussion. That it is regarded by so many as a comedy is a reflection on our cynical society, especially if we think of comedy in the classical tradition of "all's well that ends well." Tell that to the thousands of victims who lost to Belfort more than \$100 million dollars, money that most of them could not afford to lose. If you want to see a film in which a Belfort-like character is transformed, then be sure to see the excellent father-son film [The Boiler Room](#) or *Wall Street* itself. In the meantime, I am hoping that this film is not embraced by those voting on the ten films to be included in the list of Best Picture Oscar contenders. The cast is so persuasive in this over the top three-hour immersion in greed and corruption that such an endorsement might mislead more viewers into thinking that greed is indeed the best way to achieve the American Dream.

The full review with a set of 10 questions for reflection or discussion is in the January 2014 issue of Visual Parables. If you are not a subscriber and plan to discuss this film with a group, go to The Store to buy either the single issue or for a year's subscription.