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The Ten Commandments and Public Piety: Comparing Jesus and Judge Roy Moore

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Judge Roy Moore has emerged as one of America's most visible and popular Christians in the twenty-first century. Well known for his unsuccessful fight to keep a 5,200 pound monument of the Ten Commandments in the rotunda of the Alabama Supreme Court building, Judge Moore has rapidly become a leading symbol of conservative Christians' battle to fight off encroaching secularism and preserve a solid moral foundation for "Christian America."

Is Judge Moore a hero or just a defiant, misguided and defrocked judge? How should Christians regard his behavior? I contend that we can answer these questions merely by contrasting Judge Moore's style of public piety with that of Jesus.

To begin with, Jesus never suggested to public officials that they pray in public settings. His advice to everyone was: "When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." Jesus modeled this by always retiring to quiet, remote places to pray. Yet when Judge Moore was a district judge in Alabama, he regularly brought in Protestant ministers to lead prayer before gatherings of jurors, parties, and witnesses who were required to be in Moore's courtroom. Many of these visitors were put off by the prayers but that apparently did not faze him; Judge Moore never relented in defending the propriety of the prayers.

Nor did Jesus spend any time crafting large monuments of the Ten Commandments and erecting them in places where everyone could see them. He did not wear a Ten Commandments T-shirt or carry a copy of the Ten Commandments with him, stopping here and there to make sure they were posted in public places for all to be reminded that the law of God was the foundation of society. Jesus' mission was not a political one, but a spiritual one in which he offered himself as the means of personal salvation to all who would hear. Jesus' goal was to make Christians, not to Christianize the Roman government. Not once did Jesus call upon governmental authority to assist him in his spiritual mission. I suspect Judge Moore wants to make Christians too, but unlike Jesus, he abuses political institutions by using them as a means to achieve his spiritual goals.

Jesus certainly did not go on the speaking circuit to convince all Romans that the Roman Empire was in moral decline and that the empire should display the Ten Commandments to remind all Romans of their duties to God. Jesus quietly went about

healing the sick, feeding the hungry, helping the poor, and offering a relationship to God to all who would listen. He and his disciples collected only enough money to meet their daily essential needs. In stark contrast, Judge Moore today is not only cashing in on the speaking circuit, but has recently written a book, *So Help Me God*, which he promotes at book-signing celebrations in bookstores around the country. Judge Moore also sent his 2 ½ ton monument on a 2005 tour around the United States—after it was banished from the Alabama State Court Building. A large truck carried the monument, and rallies were prearranged at a number of stops around the country where the monument was displayed before Moore’s burgeoning multitude of friends and admirers. Somehow I cannot picture Jesus promoting the Ten Commandments in these rather self-indulgent ways. Nor did Jesus ever seek political office to convey his message, yet Judge Moore is now contemplating running either for Governor of Alabama or even President of the United States to gain a bigger platform for his message.

Judge Moore and his supporters claim that posting the Ten Commandments will help fill what is increasingly becoming a “naked public square.” But our nation already affirms in many ways the belief that God’s sovereignty extends to our national life. The national motto, “In God We Trust,” is imprinted on our currency. Congress and most of our state legislatures open with prayer each day led by state-paid chaplains. We observe an annual national day of prayer. We invoke the name of God in the Pledge of Allegiance. We observe numerous national holidays that are religious in nature. We even affirm the right of government bodies to display religious symbols such as crosses and menorahs, provided they are clearly muted with secular symbols. These are generic symbols that validate the religious character of America, but are less coercive than sectarian-specific practices such as posting the Ten Commandments on government property (property that is owned by all citizens, not just those from the Judeo-Christian tradition).

There is actually a very simple solution to the Ten Commandments controversy. For those who think the Ten Commandments are important, they should memorize them—and have their children memorize them. In this way, they carry the truths of the Ten Commandments in their hearts, and have no need to resort to public displays. Moreover, refusing to decorate government property with the Ten Commandments respects the values of good Americans from non Judeo-Christian religious traditions who are offended by the displays.

In the end, opposition to state-sponsored displays of the Ten Commandments does not arise out of hostility to the values set forth in the commandments. Rather, it proceeds from a deep respect for the diversity of religions that enjoy the freedom to practice their faith on American soil--those that embrace the Ten Commandments and those that do not. By adhering to the principle of separation of church and state we best fulfill the Constitution's mandate of religious liberty for all Americans and the human mandate to treat each other with respect and dignity. This is not Roy Moore’s way, but I believe that it is Jesus’ way.