

Chief Justice Ray Moore of Montgomery, Alabama, made news this week because he defended the Ten Commandments. Last year the Americans United for Church and State sued to have a monument of the commandments removed from the state judicial building in Alabama. A federal judge ruled in their favor: the Ten Commandments in the building's rotunda violated the constitution's ban against government promotion of religion. But Chief Justice Moore refused to remove the monument. He was overruled by his eight colleagues on the court and suspended. Now the 5,000 pound commandments have been wheeled away, and supporters are pouring out. Ironically, every day in court people swear on a bible to tell the truth.

In the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments are only the first of hundreds of commandments God gave the Israelites. In today's first reading, Moses tells the people about the statutes and decrees God gave them. "Observe them carefully," he says, for an interesting reason: "thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations." We observe the commandments not just to please God, but to teach others about God too. Moses asks rhetorically, "What great nation has statutes and decrees as just as ours?"

The separation of church and state does not eliminate the relationship between church and state. The state permits the free practice of religion, and religion critiques the morality of the state.

The first amendment to our constitution opens with these words, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The state may not establish a national religion like Judaism or Christianity. But it should permit free religious expression. Too often, our courts interpret the phrase "freedom of religion" to mean "freedom from religion." There must be a way the state can honor the faith of citizens without appearing to endorse one belief.

Moses said if the people observed all the commands God gave them, other nations would see how wise and intelligent God's people are. Our own nation may not see how wise and intelligent believers are because we have not observed what God asks of us. The commandments are good, but they are difficult. When we experience the inner peace that comes from doing God's will, others will want to know more about the commandments we keep.