

Galatians 5:22–23 (NIV)

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and **self-control**. Against such things there is no law.

James 1:19–20 (NIV)

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

1 Samuel 25:9–25 (CEB)

[Hiding out from the king, David’s men seek help from Nabal, whose shepherds and flocks have been protected by David’s band of rebels.]

⁹ When David’s young men arrived, they said all this to Nabal on David’s behalf. Then they waited. ¹⁰ But Nabal answered David’s servants, “Who is David? Who is Jesse’s son? There are all sorts of slaves running away from their masters these days. ¹¹ Why should I take my bread, my water, and the meat I’ve butchered for my shearers and give it to people who came here from who knows where?” ¹² So David’s young servants turned around and went back the way they came. When they arrived, they reported every word of this to David.

¹³ Then David said to his soldiers, “All of you, strap on your swords!” So each of them strapped on their swords, and David did the same. Nearly four hundred men went up with David. Two hundred men remained back with the supplies.

¹⁴ One of Nabal’s servants told his wife Abigail, “David sent messengers from the wilderness to greet our master, but he just yelled at them. ¹⁵ But the men were very good to us and didn’t mistreat us. Nothing of ours went missing the whole time we were out with them in the fields. ¹⁶ In fact, the whole time we were with them, watching our sheep, they were a protective wall around us both night and day. ¹⁷ Think about that and see what you can do, because trouble is coming for our master and his whole household. But he’s such a despicable person no one can speak to him.”

¹⁸ Abigail quickly took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five sheep ready for cooking, five seahs of roasted grain, one hundred raisin cakes, and two hundred fig cakes. She loaded all this on donkeys ¹⁹ and told her servants, “Go on ahead of me. I’ll be right behind you.” But she didn’t tell her husband Nabal.

²⁰ As she was riding her donkey, going down a trail on the hillside, David and his soldiers appeared, descending toward her, and she met up with them. ²¹ David had just been saying, “What a waste of time—guarding all this man’s stuff in the wilderness so that nothing of his went missing! He has repaid me evil instead of good! ²² May God deal harshly with me, David, and worse still if I leave alive even one single one who urinates on a wall belonging to him come morning!”

²³ When Abigail saw David, she quickly got off her donkey and fell facedown before him, bowing low to the ground. ²⁴ She fell at his feet and said, “Put the blame on me, my master! But please let me, your servant, speak to you directly. Please listen to what your servant has to say. ²⁵ Please, my master, pay no attention to this despicable man Nabal. He’s exactly what his name says he is! His name means fool, and he is foolish! But I myself, your servant, didn’t see the young men that you, my master, sent.

The Spirit gives us the strength to restrain our darker impulses and desires.

I'm sure we all have stories of times when we lost control of ourselves, striking out at others in anger or giving into temptation. As a parent, it was sometimes a difficult task to teach children the value of self-control. In the Bible, self-control is pretty much what you think it is. Here is more from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*:

Self-control is one of the few characteristics of a godly person that are not directly attributed to God's character, although it is listed in Galatians 5:23 as a fruit of the Spirit (*see Holy Spirit*), which shows that it comes from God. Lack of self-control is the natural tendency for fallen human beings, as we see when the newly liberated nation of Israel, left to itself while Moses meets with God on Mt. Sinai, quickly turns to idol worship (*see Idol, Idolatry*) and runs wild, making itself a laughingstock to its enemies (Ex 32:25). Because of this tendency, we are continually warned against losing self-control and are called to practice self-discipline (1 Cor 7:5; 1 Thess 5:4–7; 2 Tim 3:2–4).

Self-control leads to holiness or godliness (Acts 24:25; 1 Thess 5:6, 8; 2 Tim 1:7; Tit 2:12; 2 Pet 1:5–6) and is so crucial for Christ's followers that self-discipline is a requirement for anyone who wishes to be a leader in the church or a mentor for others (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:8; 2:2, 5–6; *see Leadership*). To James, practicing self-control is like breaking in an animal: "If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal" (Jas 3:2–3 NIV). . . .¹

God's people lose control of themselves (Exodus 32)

As the writer of the dictionary entry above notes, loss of self-control can encompass an entire community, as illustrated at the foot of Mt. Sinai millennia ago. Here is that story.

After being saved from slavery to Pharaoh, at the foot of Mt. Sinai God's people have been taught how they should live with God and one another. They are about to begin construction of a dwelling place for their God. But, as has been their story, they choose rebellion against God even in this moment. They are impatient and restless. Moses is taking too long. The people lose all self-control.

While Moses was on the mountaintop receiving the very word of God, a terrible thing happened. Pretty much the worst thing ever. So chilling was it in its execution that the consequences could only be disastrous.

When Moses had been gone longer than the people expected,² they panicked and turned to Aaron, Moses's brother, and pleaded for gods that could lead them as they thought they ought to be led. That's bad enough. But it got worse, much worse. Aaron led the people in constructing a golden calf out of their melted down jewelry. And they worshipped this pagan idol, this abomination. They worshipped it and thanked the statue for bringing them out of Egypt. And

¹ Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 772–773.

² This story begins at 32:1 and continues the narrative 24:14. The truth is that it is very difficult to be confident of the chronological ordering of the events at the mountain.

as the NIV so mildly translates, they indulged in “revelry.” It was all one massive collapse of self-control!

God hurried Moses down the mountain to see for himself the depth of Israel’s sin. And then God tells Moses that he is done with these people. God is ready to let his fury devour them and start over with Moses alone. But Moses pleads with God on behalf of the people and God relents . . . the people will live.

But that isn’t the end of it. The people will live but God tells Moses to go ahead without him. The people are so rebellious they will never complete the trip. At some point, they will be consumed by God’s holy anger, much as you and I would be consumed were we to fly too close to the sun.

And so Moses again comes before God, ready to plead for the Israelites, to persuade God that he must go on with the Israelites to the Promised Land. What courage it must have taken for Moses to again appeal to God, not deferentially, but firmly and directly. Talk about self-control! This is one of Moses’ very best moments.

Perhaps Moses’ courage and self-control in confronting God was born in his understanding of God’s nature. Like Moses, prayer should sustain our commitment to God and his purposes. But that prayer must be genuine and grounded in the deeply faithful relationship God desires to have with each of us, a relationship to which we can bring all our hopes and all our fears. Moses has come to know something of God and is relentless in his daring appeals. Terence Fretheim expands on this for us:

Remarkably, Moses does not accede to God’s request; he does not leave God alone. In fact, he speaks on behalf of the people (see Ps. 106:23; Jer. 18:20), though he has not yet seen for himself what has happened. The boldness of his reply indicates something of the nature of the relationship between God and Moses. God has so entered into this relationship that such dialogue is invited, indeed welcomed: *God is not the only one who has something important to say*. Moses’ argument is stunning in its directness, but without excusing Israel in any way (cf. Num. 14:11–20). It is reminiscent of the lament psalms, particularly those designed to motivate God to act (see Ps. 13:3–4; 79:9–10). His argument is threefold; he states two matters in question form and concludes with three imperatives.

1. An appeal to *God’s reasonableness*. God has only just delivered this people (Moses has the confession straight!), and so what sense does it make for God to reverse that action so quickly? The assumption on Moses’ part is that God is the kind of God who will take into account factors of reason and logic in making decisions and considering options.

2. An appeal to *God’s reputation*. Moses raises the concern: What will the neighbors say? A recurrent theme throughout the narrative has been that God has acted on Israel’s behalf in order that the Egyptians and others might know that Yahweh is Lord (see 14:4, 18; 9:16). What would they now think, if God destroyed them (see Num. 14:13–16; Deut. 9:28; Ezek. 20:14)? Moreover, in the commandments (see at 20:7) God has shown himself to be concerned about reputation and the contexts in which the divine name is used. If God were to destroy this people, would not that place the divine purpose with respect to non-Israelite peoples, indeed God’s very name, in some jeopardy?

3. A reminder of *God's own promise*—to which God has personally sworn!—to this people that their descendants would be multiplied (not killed off!) and that they would inherit the land. God has made a commitment to Israel, and would not God be following the same course as the people by going back on such a promise? It is a matter of God being true to self. Moses extends this argument somewhat beyond what God had said would be done. God had in fact promised Moses, “Of you I will make a great nation” (v. 10). Hence God does have those promises in mind. There would be a way for God to remain true to these promises in and through Moses, but that would be like starting with Abraham once again.³

So, God does not “smite” all the Israelites, abandoning the project begun with Abraham. Instead, remarkably, God will reveal himself to Moses, to the Israelites, to the whole world. If you want to know God, there is no better place to start than with God's self-description in Exodus 34, remembering that it follows on the heels of the Israelite's terrible sin with the golden calf.

In contrast to Moses' self-control and courage, King David once lost all control of himself and nearly did terrible, terrible, things. David needed a rescuer. Here is that story, in which David's loss of control is more than matched by Abigail's courage.

David's lack of self-control and his rescue from it

David is on the run from the mad king, Saul, and has been hiding in the wilderness areas south of Jerusalem. He has a band of fellow rebels numbering 600 or more and all of them are living off the land and the kindness of sympathetic Israelites. He learns of a rich man named Nabal (which means “fool”) and asks for help, noting that David's men have protected Nabal's men and flocks in the wild. Nabal, ever the fool, decides to ignore David's request and insults him to boot. When David learns of this, he decides that the only proper course for him and his men is to strap on their swords and head out for a fight.

Word of all this reaches Abigail, Nabal's wife, who decides that *attack* is the only way to deal with this crisis. So, she assembles a huge store of food and heads out to intercept David. She meets him in a ravine and confronts him with the truth – David is going to shed blood over an insult. She acknowledges her husband's foolishness and begs for mercy. And David relents, knowing that Abigail has saved him from his own temper. David had acted rashly and unwisely – without virtue; Abigail, in contrast, showed true courage and wisdom, which peacemaking offer requires in large measure. Bruce Birch comments:

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God” (Matt 5:9 NRSV). Peacemaking and acting as a partner in God's family are allied in this saying of Jesus. Abigail models it. David is reminded of it by Abigail on the verge of violating the peace, and he sees God's action in Abigail (1 Sam 25:32, 39). To do good rather than evil is to align our actions

³ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 285–286.

with what God is doing. To be peacemakers is to seek the unity of human moral agency with divine agency

Peace in the Hebrew sense of *šālôm* means wholeness and well-being. . . . In our own time, it is often easier to confront great forces of obvious evil (Hitlers and Stalins, KKK and Bull Connors, apartheid and ethnic cleansing) than to confront our own mean-spirited foolishness and the evil that results. It is easy to desire peacemaking and turning from vengeance as the work of diplomats and Nobel prize winners. It is more difficult to rush, like Abigail, into the breaches of daily life where foolishness provokes violence and standing between the two is risky business.⁴

When Nabal hears what Abigail has done, he collapses and dies soon afterward. And David then took Abigail for his wife. A fitting ending.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Ruth*

Next week we will begin the gospel of Luke

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *Acts*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This week: Week 4 -- *The Atheist Delusion: Science, the Bible, and the Truth in Which We Live*.

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.

⁴ Bruce C. Birch, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 1994–2004, 2, 1170–1171.