

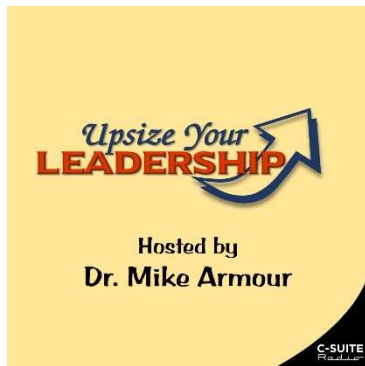
# Gratitude

## *The Unheralded Leadership Trait*

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

### Episode UYL1920

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We are not by nature grateful beings. Gratitude must be learned. Think of the countless times that parents remind a youngster to say “thank you” before the habit sinks in – if it sinks in at all.

Yet there are few dispositions which have a greater impact on the quality of our lives than the ability to be grateful. Truly, deeply grateful. With our national celebration of Thanksgiving Day this week, I’m taking the opportunity with this podcast to talk about gratitude and why it is so telling in determining our happiness, our well-being, and even our morality.

And while gratitude is a vital disposition for our personal life, for leaders it’s particularly important. In fact, my thesis today is that gratitude may well be the most unheralded attribute of great leaders. It’s seldom listed in the qualities of good leadership. Yet, today I want to show you why gratitude is a foundational virtue if you want to Upsize Your Leadership.

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When we lived in southern California, I taught a Sunday morning adult Bible class at our church. One spring morning our topic was stewardship, that is, how to be good stewards of what heaven supplies. Early in the lesson, in an effort to launch a class discussion, I noted, “We are stewards of many things. Which of these things is most important?”

This was a question I commonly asked whenever I taught on stewardship. And having raised the question time and again over the years, I had a fairly distinct sense of things which people would mention.

But I did not anticipate the very first response that morning. And the response came immediately, meaning that the woman who voiced it had thought about this question at length herself. Equally surprising, she was a woman who rarely spoke up in class. As far as I can remember, she had ever before volunteered her viewpoint during class discussions.

But as soon as I asked, “What the most important thing to be good stewards of,” she answered, “Our gratitude.” Not only did her comment catch me by surprise, it struck me as perhaps the most insightful response which my question had ever garnered. So insightful, indeed, that before I knew it, our class dialogue was no longer about stewardship, but about gratitude.

As first one class member, then another delved into the topic, several mentioned that they needed to remind themselves regularly to be grateful. For many people, it seems, if not most, gratitude must be nurtured to be maintained. Not that they are so impolite that they ignore the common courtesy of saying “thank you” when appropriate. But “thank you” can easily become nothing more than a common courtesy somewhat like saying “please” or “good morning.” I’ve known plenty of people, including no small number of leaders, who faithfully practiced the social nicety of saying “thank you,” but whose outlooks and attitudes reflected little by way of genuine gratitude.

And that’s a shame. Because I’ve come to recognize gratitude as one of the most fundamental determinants of how we approach life in general and leadership in particular. Let me explain what brings me to this conclusion.

And let me approach that task indirectly. Instead of talking about the importance of gratitude – a common theme around Thanksgiving – let me focus instead on its opposite, ingratitude, and the wholesale damage which ingratitude inflicts on personal lives, leadership, and institutions. Sometimes the best way to learn about something is to examine the nature of its polar opposite. And that’s especially true with gratitude.

I begin with a little mental exercise. I want you to notice what happens when I describe someone as being habitually ungrateful. Someone whose ingratitude is routinely on display. To process my description, you have to conjure up some image of this person. Reflect on that image for a moment. What is that person like? What picture did my description engender in your mind?

I doubt that it was an image of someone who is cheerful, always upbeat, and intent on spreading goodwill. More than likely you pictured a person who is somewhat dour, prone to pessimism, and perhaps not particularly pleasant to be around.

Why did you map that kind of portrait? Because we instinctively recognize that ingratitude poisons a person’s disposition. Or to put it another way, no one ever became a better person – or a better leader, for that matter – by being perpetually ungrateful.

The very nature of ingratitude promotes self-centeredness. That’s because ingratitude is preoccupied with how it has been wronged or deprived in some way, how it has been short-changed or given short shrift. Ingratitude believes that it deserves better.

In fact, its preoccupation with what it deserves speaks of a sense of entitlement at the heart of ingratitude. When someone says, “What did I do to deserve this?”, you always know that he or she perceives some experience as grossly unfair.

No one ever says, “Wasn’t the sunrise absolutely spectacular this morning? What did I do to deserve that?” And who reacts to a surprise promotion or a huge bonus by asking, “Why was a thing like that allowed to happen? What did I do to deserve such a thing?”

Instead, we are inclined to see ourselves as deserving of good things which happen to us. It’s the bad things which we don’t deserve, or so we believe. We let these bad things upset us because we are entitled to receive better.

Thus, ingratitude is self-centered. That makes it particularly dangerous for leaders. The danger comes from its impact on humility.

For one thing, self-centeredness, with its sense of entitlement, chokes out humility, a cornerstone of great leadership. People want leaders who are confident, but not arrogant. Who are assertive, but not ego-driven. Humility allows a leader to maintain that balance. And genuine gratitude, when married to humility, makes that balance even easier to maintain.

Humility also permits leaders to admit their need to learn. To learn more about their craft. To learn from their team members. Even to learn from things which go wrong. Without humility, leaders see no reason to learn from others. They are therefore not good team-builders and collaborators.

Likewise, when things go well, self-centered leaders tend to take too much credit. And when things go wrong, they are quick to blame others. As a result, they not only fail to learn from others, they may not even learn from their own mistakes.

At its finest, leadership is about drawing out the best in people. Being attuned to their potential. Looking for ways to celebrate their successes. Serving their interests above self-interest. Self-centered leaders never excel at such callings. Their preoccupation with self stands in the way. And when ingratitude links up with a lack of humility, they feed on each other, making self-centeredness even more entrenched.

But the damage done by ingratitude does not end there. Toward the top of the program, I commented that gratitude has a shaping influence on morality. Let me explain why that's true by looking at what ingratitude does to upright behavior.

When we habitually complain about disappointments or unpleasant experiences, we fuel and feed resentment. "It's not fair," we tell ourselves. "I deserved better." Resentment is quick to form an alliance with jealousy and envy. They serve to focus our resentment on those who received what we think that we ourselves deserved. Stoked by jealousy and envy, resentment can only brew so long before it pushes us to even the score. Payback and revenge become the game of the day. And revenge does not particularly care whether we even the score ethically or not.

No attitudes are more deadly than resentment, jealousy, envy, and revenge. And because revenge can so readily justify the most unprincipled patterns of payback, it sets the stage for compromise on moral and ethical principles, one after another.

People who in normal circumstances are upright and above board, can, in the grip of resentment, jealousy, and revenge, do things which are truly heinous. How many otherwise good people are serving murder sentences because jealousy or revenge got the best of them?

Now, people who resort to settling the score in an unprincipled way only rarely take actions so extreme as actually killing someone. But the less serious behaviors to which they turn are frequently a complete betrayal of the ethical norms which elsewhere govern their lives.

Take employees who resent their company for not promoting them. I've often seen employees like this resort to pilferage, embezzlement, or even outright theft of company property – and they took these steps with no pangs of conscience. After all, the company owed it to them as compensation for the injustice that they had suffered at the company's hands. Yet, elsewhere in their life these same people would never think of stealing.

Others try to even the score by finding ways to discredit or undermine the success of those whom they resent. If I'm jealous of what someone else has received – undeservedly in my opinion since what that person received should have come to me – I may feel no shame whatsoever in turning the tables on them. Letting them experience what it's like to be treated unfairly. After all, I've had to endure it? Why shouldn't they be made to feel what I've been forced to suffer?

When people set out to destroy someone out of resentment or revenge, they may not be open and overt about what they are doing. In fact, the people who are most skilled at this type of subterfuge are often quite subtle and clever in mounting an attack.

A friend of mine – I'll call him Bill – was a victim of this type of unprincipled assault. It came at the hands of a colleague who never made a single adverse criticism of Bill to other people. But the man would occasionally say to someone in a private side-conversation, "Have you heard anything about Bill doing such-and-such?" No one ever had. But now questions about Bill's integrity and judgment were planted in people's minds. And given the way rumors start, the gossip mill was soon speculating that Bill must be up to no good.

Bill finally decided to get to the root of this rumor. He began backtracking to trace the rumor to its source. Rather quickly, his investigation led him back to the man who had started the entire affair. But when he was confronted with what he had done, the man acted offended and indignant. In his strongest self-righteous tone, he proclaimed that he had never once said that Bill had done such-and-such. He did acknowledge that he had indeed asked people if they had heard anything along those lines. But he had never stated anything in the form of an actual accusation, which in his mind meant that he was altogether blameless.

Now, the man behind this character assassination was a well-known and widely-respected professional, held in high esteem for his moral and ethical reputation. But his resentment of Bill's success led him to act completely out of character with his reputation.

I would argue that ingratitude can give rise to any evil in the world. It is indeed a moral poison. So, how do we keep gratitude in good repair?

For me, the formula is to remind myself regularly of all of the good things I have which I don't deserve. To stoke this gratitude, there is one picture which I regularly play before my mind. It's a picture of one particular slum in Africa, where hundreds of thousands of people live a pitiful life. The ones who are a bit better off have at least one or two wooden walls to the lean-tos which they call a house. Most people have only a cardboard hut.

Latrines feed into an open sewer which runs through the middle of the slum, a sewer so putrid that it occasionally ignites. When that happens, the flimsy lean-to houses spread the flames with a fury. Not uncommonly, hundreds of people will be injured or consumed by one of these flash fires.

So, what did I do to deserve being born in the U.S. instead of in that slum in Africa? Or for that matter, what did I do to deserve being born in the modern era? Even the poorest in America – and in most of today's world – have more creature comforts than 99% of the people who have ever lived. Even a rattletrap car provides a faster and more comfortable ride than the most regal carriage from by-gone eras. Inexpensive, over-the-counter medications provide more healing power and relief from pain than any emperor had the power to obtain in the not-too-distant past.

Food is more abundant, disease less rampant, and life-expectancy more extended than in any time in human history.

Remind me then, what is it that I did to deserve all of this? Personally, I really can't think of a thing.

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*Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at [www.LeaderPerfect.com](http://www.LeaderPerfect.com).*

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