

Pittacus of Mytilene

During the year 640 BCE, Pittacus of Mytilene was born, and his Thracian father Hyrrus was King of Mytilene. Founded by the *Penttilidae* family of Thessaly, Mytilene was an Aeolic colony on the island of Lesbos in Aeolia. Yet by the time that Pittacus was a young adult, the entire island of Lesbos was ruled by the tyrant Melanchrus, who was in danger. At that time, older brothers of the poet Alcaeus of Mytilene were plotting to overthrow Melanchrus, and Pittacus had joined the brothers in their treasonous plot.



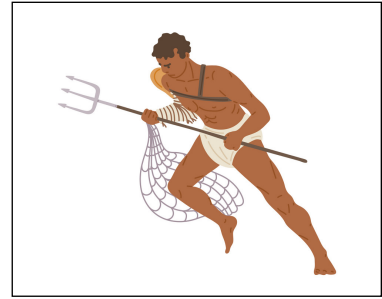
By the year 609 BCE, Pittacus and his co-conspirators had overthrown Melanchrus, and then Mytilene came to be ruled by the tyrant Myrsilus. Not long after that, Alcaeus joined with his older brothers and Pittacus in a plot to overthrow Myrsilus. Yet in a treacherous turn of events, Pittacus slyly betrayed his co-conspirators (by alerting Myrsilus to the plot). As a result, Myrsilus still ruled Mytilene, and Alcaeus fled from Mytilene with his brothers. By betraying his co-conspirators, Pittacus had been betraying his friends, because his co-conspirators were his friends. Yet, if they were to have overthrown the tyrant Myrsilus, then Pittacus and his friends would have been breaking the law (for the second time).

1. Which is worse: betraying your friends or breaking the law? Explain.
2. By the year 606 BCE, the Mytilenaeans and the Athenians were at war with each other over control of the city of Sigeion. Pittacus was the *strategos* (or commander) of the Mytilene's army,¹ and the Olympic champion Phrynon of Athens was the *strategos* (or commander) of the Athenian army.² In contrast to Phrynon's impressive physique, Pittacus was sloppy, short, and flatfooted, and he dragged his chapped feet as he walked. Hoping to end a battle with as little bloodshed as possible, Pittacus boldly proposed to Phrynon that they should fight to the death in a deadly game of one-on-one combat. If you had been Phrynon's most trusted advisor, what would you have advised him to do? Would you have advised Phrynon to *accept* the challenge? *Why* or *why not*? Explain.

¹ στρατηγός

² Three decades earlier (around the year 636 BCE), Phrynon of Athens had won the *stadion* or *pentathlon* in the Olympic Games.

3. Accepting the challenge, Phrynon engaged Pittacus in one-one-one mortal combat. Yet along with a deadly weapon, Pittacus had brought with him a fishing net, which he tactfully used as a snare. Once he'd ensnared Phrynon with the net, Pittacus fatally wounded the Athenian, and the duel was over. Was the fight a *fair* fight? *Why* or *why not*? Explain.



4. After he had killed Phrynon, Pittacus remarked, "Never announce to others what you plan to do, because if your plan fails then others will laugh at you." Yet, what if you could be *sure* that your plans would not fail? (For example, imagine someone who can do 3,000 pushups. Is there anything wrong about them being cocky about their ability to do 200 pushups?)
5. After he had killed Phrynon, Pittacus led the Mytilenaeen army to take control of all of the land around Sigeion that the Athenian army had captured. Yet once the Athenian army had regrouped under a new commander, the war over Sigeion continued, and neither side was gaining ground against the other side. With no end to the war in sight, the Athenians and

the Mytilenaeans agreed to settle their dispute with words (instead of weapons). Strongly approving of the decision, Pittacus said, “Men should seek *bloodless* victories.” Yet, if you had been at war for a very long time, would you accept a bloodless *defeat*?

6. After the war against the Athenians, the Mytilenaeans had become divided into competing political factions, and they were quite ready to settle their political differences with violence. Yet due to his leadership during the war against the Athenians, Pittacus was very popular among all of his fellow Mytilenaeans. Setting aside their political differences, the competing Mytilenaeon factions agreed to give Pittacus total control over the government of Mytilene. Hence by the year 590 BCE, the Mytilenaeon people had elected Pittacus to be Mytilene’s *aesymnetes* (or administrator).³ As a result, Pittacus became an *elected tyrant*. By giving him complete and total control over Mytilene’s government, were the Mytilenaeans doing the right thing?

³ αἰσυνήτης

7. Pittacus said, “Whenever a man has power, his power shows who he really is.” If someone were to be given absolute power, how might you expect their behavior and their attitude, personality, or mentality to change?⁴

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8. On the virtue of temperance, Pittacus said, “Love temperance.” To encourage sobriety (and discourage drunkenness), Pittacus enacted a new law establishing that crimes committed while drunk should be punished twice as harshly as crimes committed while sober. Do you agree with his law? For example, do you agree that a *drunk* driver who *accidentally* kills a pedestrian should be punished *more* as harshly than a *sober* driver who *accidentally* kills a pedestrian? *Why* or *why not*? Explain.

9. Seeking advice on marriage from Pittacus of Mytilene, young man from Atarneus said, “I’ve received two offers of marriage, and I don’t know which maiden to choose as my bride. One of the two maidens comes from a family as privileged as my own, and the other one of

⁴ For example, would they become *more* selfish or greedy? *Less* selfish or greedy?

the two maidens comes from a family that is more privileged than mine. Who should I marry?" Raising his staff, an elderly Pittacus pointed to a group of young boys who were spinning tops, and he said, "Those boys tell the whole story! Go and see what they say!" Hence when the young man approached the boys, he repeatedly heard them say, "Keep to your own sphere!" In giving that advice to the young man, Pittacus seems to have been speaking from personal experience. Indeed, his wife came from a family that was more privileged than his own family, and she acted as if she was worth more than him as a person. Taking the advice that Pittacus had given, the young man ultimately decided *not* to marry the maiden whose family was more privileged than his family. If the young man had asked *you* for advice, what advice would you have given him?

10. Pittacus was the father of his son Tyrraeus. While in the Aeolian city of Cyme, Tyrraeus sat in a barber's shop, where he was murdered by a metalsmith. After arresting the metalsmith, the people of Cyme sent the murderer to the victim's father Pittacus. Yet rather than punish his son's murderer, Pittacus freed the metalsmith.

(a) If you were Pittacus, what would you have done? Explain.

(b) To explain *why* he'd pardoned the metalsmith who had murdered his son Tyrraeus, Pittacus said, "Mercy is better than revenge. I better forgive now than repent later." Do you agree with Pittacus? Why or why not? Explain.

11. When a certain Phocaeen had suggested to him that they should go and look for an ethical human, Pittacus replied, "If you try too hard to find an ethical human, you'll never find one at all!" Alas in the same vein, Pittacus said, "It is difficult to be an ethical man." Do you agree with him? *Why* or why *not*? Explain.
12. Pittacus said, "Never shame someone who is suffering from a misfortune, because you might suffer from a misfortune one day." Yet, imagine someone who never suffers from misfortune during their entire life? Would it ever be okay for someone like that to shame others for suffering from misfortunes? *Why* or why *not*? Explain.

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By the year 582 BCE, Pittacus came to be known as one of the Seven Sages. As a prize for his wisdom, Pittacus had received a golden tripod, a solid-gold beaker, a golden goblet, and a bowl. By that time, two of the various Delphic maxims were attributed to him.

- Know thine opportunity. (Know how to tell when an opportunity arises.)
- Nothing too much. (Everything in moderation.)

At a certain point, he was invited by Croesus of Lydia to visit Lydia. In a message responding to the invitation, Pittacus said, "I will not benefit from visiting Lydia. Everyone knows that you're richest man in the *world*! Hence even without seeing your prosperity, I'm

already convinced that you are the most opulent king. Yet even so, I'll visit Lydia so that I may meet you (and be entertained by you)." After that, Pittacus travelled to Lydia, where he met Croesus as well as the five sages Bias of Priene, Solon of Athens, Cleobulus of Lindos, Chilon of Sparta, and Anacharsis the Scythian. (Thales of Miletus also was invited, but he refused to attend.) Speaking to Pittacus, Croesus asked, "What is the greatest rule?" In response to the question, Pittacus answered, "The greatest rule is the rule of law." Like many wealthy men, Croesus of Lydia wished to expand his sphere of influence, and so he asked Pittacus of Mytilene and Bias of Priene about the best way to fight a sea battle against the Ionians of the Aegean islands (such as the islands of Samos and Chios). Pittacus and Bias wished to avoid bloodshed, and so they told Croesus the lie that the Ionians were buying ten-thousand war horses to use in a land battle against the Lydian army. Believing the lie, Croesus changed his war plans, and he prepared for a land battle against the Ionians. At that point, Pittacus and Bias told Croesus the lie that the Ionians were also building many new warships. In the end, Croesus decided to ally with the Ionians (rather than attack them).

13. Right before Pittacus was about to leave Lydia, Croesus offered had him a lifetime allowance of money. Respectfully declining to accept the generous gift from Croesus, Pittacus said, "I have twice as much money as I want! When my unmarried and childless brother died, I inherited all of his wealth, and so I don't need any more money. Indeed, my possessions are more than enough for me and my friends to enjoy!"

(a) If you already had more money than you ever could spend in your lifetime, would you ever decline to accept a donation of money from someone who had even more money than you? Why or why not? Explain.

(b) Is it *ever* bad for someone to have more money than they can spend in a lifetime? Why or why not? Explain.

14. Even though the Mytilenaeans would have let Pittacus be Mytilene's administrator for the rest of his life, he refused to be a tyrant. After governing Mytilene for ten years, Pittacus voluntarily (or willingly) resigned from his position as Mytilene's administrator. Hence by the year 580 BCE, Pittacus had retired.

(a) If you were the supreme leader of a people who wanted you to be their leader for the rest of your life, would you ever voluntarily resign from your leadership position (and willingly give up your power)? *Why* or *why not*? Explain.

(b) If you were an absolute ruler, you obviously would lose power at *some* point. If you give up your power, you'll *willingly* lose your power. If your power is taken away from you, you'll *unwillingly* lose your power. If you die while in power, you'll *naturally* lose your power. Yet regardless of how you might lose your power, if you were an absolute ruler, *who* should be in power *after* you?

15. After he retired from being Mytilene's tyrant for a decade, the Mytilenaeans gave Pittacus a parcel of land (as a gift of gratitude).

(a) Donating most of the land as a sacred place, Pittacus said, "Practice piety! Honor the gods, your family, and your homeland!" If you were gifted more land than you could possibly ever use, would you give some of the land away for free? Why or why not? Explain.

(b) Saving a small portion of the land for himself, Pittacus said, "The half is more than the whole!" In other words, owning *half* of the donated land brought him *more* joy than having the *whole* donated land. For anything that you enjoy, is it ever possible for you to find more joy by having less of it? Why or why not? Explain.

During his retirement, Pittacus of Mytilene became a teacher. Imparting one of his teachings, he said, "In order for a man to be prudent, he must do what he can to prevent difficulties from arising. Yet, not even the gods can defy necessity! In order for a man to be courageous, he must face whatever difficulties have arisen." Interested in the wisdom that he had to offer, many people came to Pittacus with questions.

- He was asked, "What is the most noble?" He answered, "Doing things well."
- He was asked, "What is fine?" He answered, "Time is fine."
- He was asked, "What is obscure?" He answered, "The future."
- He was asked, "What is trustworthy?" He answered, "The earth."
- He was asked, "What is untrustworthy?" He answered, "The sea."

Around the year 570 BCE, Pittacus of Mytilene died at the age of seventy years old. His only known student was the sage Pherecydes of Syros, and Pherecydes would go on to teach wisdom to a young Pythagoras of Samos.