

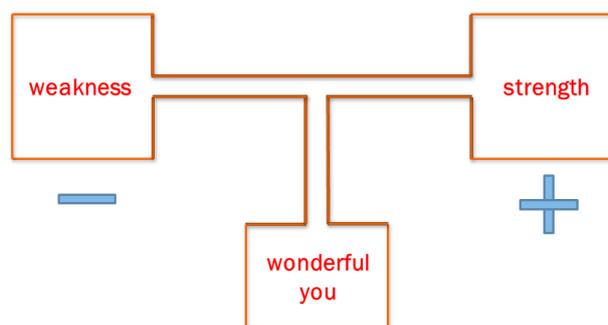
Making the Change: Phlegmatic

Introduction

One of the themes of these courses is that, in Christ, we can change. In this course, our aim is to take what we have already learnt and work it into our lives. It is possible to break those deep emotional patterns within ourselves – and to help others to do the same.

Taking the right turn

Many years ago I worked for an electricity distribution company. We often worked on control panels that contained small, low-voltage wiring and large copper busbars carrying 11,000 volts. One day, a charge-hand on the team was threading a thin copper wire into the back of one of these panels. Unfortunately for him, the wire took a wrong turn in one of the chambers and ended up touching the 11,000-volt busbars. He was thrown against the wall and knocked unconscious. He survived thanks to his rubber boots – but he learnt a painful lesson.

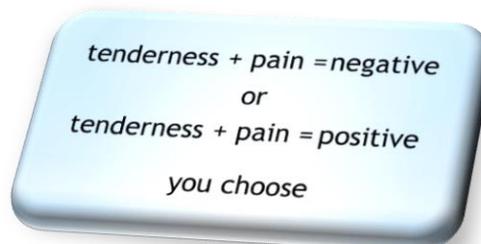


We have described our weaknesses as ‘strengths gone to seed.’ How does this work in practice? And what are the factors that determine whether that strength comes out as a quality or gets lost along the way and ends up as a weakness? This is an important question for it lies at the heart of how we handle who we are. It stretches back into our childhood and is the key ingredient in bringing

up children. It is central to helping others to live their lives in an emotionally healthy way. For those of us who never learnt how to use who we are positively, this understanding provides an opportunity to do so now. We will see how this works out with the two introvert temperaments.

Phlegmatic

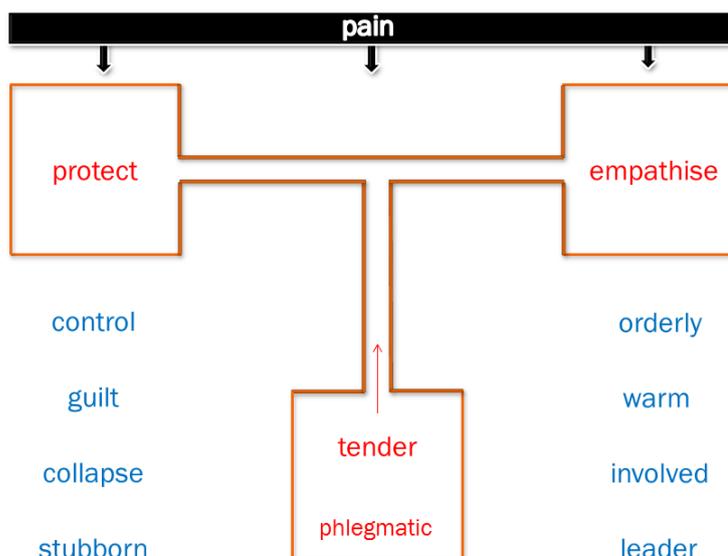
At the heart of the Phlegmatic is a great tenderness. The key to understanding him is to know what happens to that tenderness when it is exposed to pain. What are the factors that make it easier for tenderness plus pain to turn into a negative? What needs to happen for tenderness plus pain to equal a positive?



Before we explore the factors involved in deciding which way to turn, we will look more closely at the consequences of that choice.

Negative

If the tenderness doesn't respond positively to pain or pressure in life, then it soon heads off in a negative direction. Once the priority becomes self-protection then many other issues tumble in on the back of that. It follows that, in order to maintain his self-protection, he will have to exercise strong control over anyone who comes near his defences. People will feel shut outside his circle. The emotional vacuum that this lack of self-giving produces, becomes a breeding ground for guilt and 'feeling bad.' He becomes aware of feeling fragile so guilt, fear and anxiety quickly take centre stage and can lead to an eventual emotional collapse. Instead of the Phlegmatic's strength being put to positive use, it becomes committed to strengthening the defences and is felt by those on the outside as stubbornness. He feels sorry for himself and his desire for comfort leads him to adopt the victim role. The misuse of the tenderness has resulted in an emotional implosion and those wonderful qualities lie buried. At the bottom of the pit the world looks a very different place and his attitudes to those he cares about can soon become distorted and unpleasant. From a position of feeling warmth and love the feeling of being hurt can lead to payback – either by silence or picking at the other person's mistakes. It is all too easy to 'major on minors' and to carry grudges. Clearly this misuse of the Phlegmatic's tenderness has become destructive.



Positive

If the tenderness takes a right turn and is put to good use then not only are others able to enjoy that tenderness, but also all the other qualities that a Phlegmatic possesses. His capacity for tenderness, warmth and love enables him to truly feel what others feel and to express that warmth and concern in a way that makes a difference. If he keeps his emotions flowing out positively, especially to those closest to him, then he will be a force for good. He can use his objectivity, diplomacy, and his dependable and calm approach to life, to provide leadership which will create order and security in the lives of others.

Making the Change

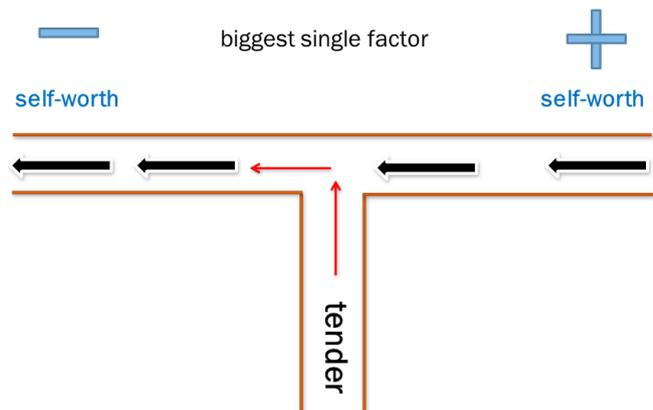
So, what do we need to be aware of when it comes to doing it differently this time around? When we come up to that 'T' junction, what do we need to know?

a. A Decision to be made

We need to be clear that there is no way of avoiding the fact that we have to make a choice. As we come up to the junction, only we can decide which way we will turn. For many of us, our response has become automatic – but it doesn't have to stay that way. We may have got it more wrong than right up to now but it isn't too late. We can start using who we are more positively from here on.

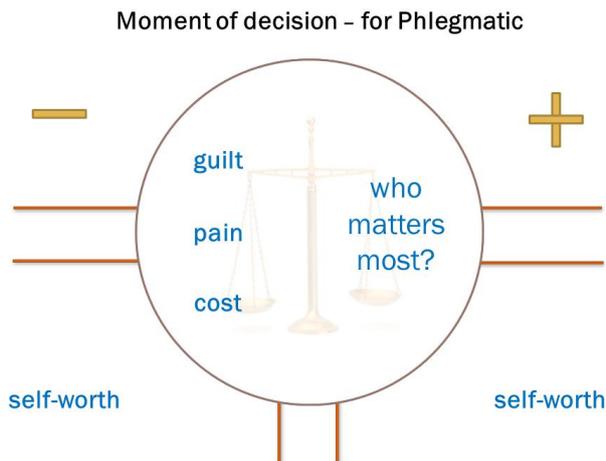
b. Biggest single factor

The major influence that is brought to bear when we make a decision to turn to the right or the left is how we feel about ourselves. If we are aware of how positively or negatively we feel about ourselves then we will begin to understand why we can so quickly get sucked down the negative route. The problem is that it soon becomes a vicious circle. We feel bad about ourselves – for all the reasons we looked at in Step Two – so we make a poor choice. That poor choice, and its consequences, simply serves to confirm what we feel about ourselves. The next time we face the same challenge it is that little bit harder to make the right choice. Conversely, when we buck the trend and make a good decision at the junction then we are stronger for the next challenge. Remember the section on strengthening the will in Step Two?



c. Guilt

The Phlegmatic has a problem. In order to feel warmth and tenderness, his emotions have to be gentle and flexible. They cannot be hard and impenetrable. The very quality that lies at the heart of the



Phlegmatic is potentially also his greatest point of weakness. He hates things that are harsh, hurtful and unpleasant. He has an ideal picture of how things should be – and when reality falls short of that ideal it is all too easy for him, in his tenderness, to somehow feel he is responsible for that 'less than ideal.' And so false guilt sets in and works its destructive power, producing self-condemnation and an over-sensitive conscience. Pain and conflict quickly translate into guilt within the Phlegmatic. As you stand at the junction, confront that false guilt before it drags you down into the busbar chamber where

it can all go horribly wrong. Uncouple that guilt from your thinking, refuse to allow your decision to be influenced by it and choose to give yourself away into whatever situation you face.

d. Pain

We all recoil physically from pain. It is our body's inbuilt way of preventing damage. The Phlegmatic's default position is anticipation that anything difficult will cause damage – so he recoils and protects himself. As we stop at the junction to consider which way to go, recognise the strong instinct to self-protect – and then deliberately do the opposite. Our emotions will only grow strong if we choose to put them into the difficult situation, into the pain, into the conflict. Putting them into the midst of unpleasantness doesn't mean they need to grow a protective skin – it means they will be strengthened from the inside out so they won't need to protect. The principle underlying Jesus' words 'whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it' (Luke 17:33) is seen clearly in this practical situation.



e. Cost

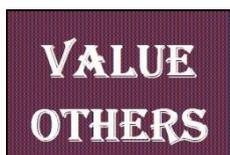


involved and deal with the emotionally costly issue.

The instinct to protect tenderness leads to a default position of simply not feeling like making the effort. A Phlegmatic has to train himself to choose to make the emotional effort to get involved rather than taking the line of least resistance. It is easier to drift into the negative because to choose to turn right into the positive will feel like swimming against the emotional tide. The Phlegmatic needs to make the deliberate choice to get

f. Who matters most?

We could find many reasons for being dragged off down the negative route – but it should only take one reason to stop that from happening. The real question is, 'Who matters here?' Is my life always going to be about me? Many Phlegmatics don't appear to be unkind or unpleasant people. In fact, one of the frustrations for close family is that people outside the family think they are wonderful – but they are not always so wonderful with their nearest and dearest as they exercise their protection and



control. A Phlegmatic only really begins to grow when they choose to put what the other person feels before what they feel. It is when the other person concerns them most that healing takes place for the Phlegmatic and his relationships. He cannot travel down both routes at the same time – he is either putting himself first or the other person. If he puts love first then guilt, being hurt and counting the cost all become irrelevant and begin to fade into the background. And more than that - over time he discovers that he is feeling differently about himself. Now he knows that he is not the awful, guilty person he believed himself to be. He knows he is not weak and insignificant – he feels stronger and more solid and is free to enter into life and live it to the full.