

Title: Practicing God's Presence**[Slide 1]****Text: Romans 12:11****First Love****Long-term love:**

We all know what it's like to "fall in love." One day we're normal; the next day we feel giddy with excitement and sick with longing. All of a sudden our new flame is the only person in the world that we think about. We're in love!

But what about 5 or 10 years down the road? What makes for long-term love when the initial feelings have subsided? Susan Krauss Whitbourne PhD helps provide the answer in her online article "The 12 Ties that Bind Long-Term Relationships" (psychologytoday.com). The 12 ties are:

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- Thinking positively about your partner.
- Thinking about your partner when apart.
- Difficulty concentrating on other things when thinking about your partner.

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- Enjoying novel and challenging activities.
- Spending time together.
- Expressing affection.
- Being turned on by your partner.
- Engaging in sexual relations.

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- Feeling generally happy.
- Wanting to know where your partner is at all times (not stalking!).
- Obsessively thinking about your partner.
- Having a strong passion for life.

Couples that did these things reported happy marriage 30 years down the road. 40 percent of women and 35 percent of men who had been married for 30 years or more said that they were *very intensely in love*.

Long-term commitment:

What jumps out at you in this list of things that bind long-term relationships? For me, the biggest takeaway is that long-term love is a choice:

- A choice to value my partner and make her the center of my thoughts all the time.
- A choice to experience life together, doing new things and investing quality time in our relationship.
- A choice to be affectionate and caring.
- A choice to let our love light up our lives.

Needless to say, these things don't just happen by themselves. They are cultivated in our hearts and acted out in our lives. Our love is not dependent on our circumstances – think “for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health.” It is based on something far deeper, a choice to love one other person with all that we have for as long as we can. Till death do us part.

First love:

This is precisely the relationship that God desires with you – one that goes the distance and only gets better and better. And like our relationship with our partner, it is a relationship that we grow through our choices about how we think and how we spend our time. It doesn't just happen!

John wrote to a well-off church in the ancient city of Ephesus that was failing in just this area:

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Revelation 2:4-5 The Message

“But you walked away from your first love – why? What’s going on with you, anyway? Do you have any idea how far you’ve fallen? A Lucifer fall!

“Turn back! Recover your dear early love. No time to waste, for I’m well on my way to removing your light from the inner circle.”

Here was a community of Christians that had neglected to grow its relationship with Jesus. They believed all the right things. They took a stand for what was right. But the spark had gone out of the relationship with their Lord.

The same can happen to us as individuals or as a church. Like a tired, neglected marriage, we can fall into a routine of doing our religious duties and running our programs, but without the fire of a passion for the God who loves us so much that He gave His best to make us His own.

Three Keys for Keeping our First Love

Keep your edge:

Paul gives us three keys for keeping our love for God strong and growing. The first Key is:

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Romans 12:11a NIV

Never be lacking in zeal...

Paul's original text reads: "In eagerness, zeal – not lazy!" In other words, Paul is saying, don't slack off in your passion and love for God! Keep your edge. Remember what it means to be God's child.

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How important is it to keep your edge? Just ask the Atlanta Falcons about the final minutes of last year's Super Bowl. At the end of the 3rd quarter the Falcons lead the Patriots 28-9. The rout was on. New England was dead in the water. In 15 minutes Atlanta would have won the Super Bowl. Except that they lost their edge. Instead of putting the game away, they let the Patriots get back into the game, and lost the game in overtime.

What went wrong? Well, the Falcons *lost* their first love for winning the Super Bowl. Who knows? Maybe they started loving the thought of that big Super Bowl ring and the endless parties that went with it. The game was in the bag, so why not move on? But while they were losing their first love for the Super Bowl, the Patriots were *finding* their first love for the game.

Moral of the story: "In eagerness – not lazy! Don't let up. Keep your edge!"

Stay on fire:

The Second Key is:

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Romans 12:11b NIV

...but keep your spiritual fervor...

Paul's literal words go like this: "In spirit – glowing." He uses a word that describes water boiling on the stove, or red hot iron fresh out of the furnace. The "spirit" can refer to either the Holy Spirit, or our own spirit. The result is the same: we're to be on fire with God.

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We have a wood stove that heats our upstairs. When it's doing its job, you would never mistake it for a coffee table! Fire flickers behind the glass. Heat radiates from its every surface. The stove is all about one thing and one thing only: making heat.

But to keep it that way, we have to keep putting wood on the fire. Isn't that the way it is with in our relationship with God? We were created to be on fire with His love and power. But if you don't put wood on the fire, no fire. The wood stove becomes a piece of furniture taking up space in a chilly house.

Every day we need to check to see if the fire of our love for God is going strong. Every day we need to put fresh fuel on the fire. Only then will we be "in spirit – glowing!"

Serve the Lord:

The Third Key is:

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Romans 12:11c NIV

...serving the Lord.

This is what we were made for. This is what it's all about. We serve in the court of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This is our highest privilege. A

hundred things will demand your service every day; but only one deserves your whole heart, soul, mind and strength.

Paul began the chapter by writing:

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Romans 12:1-2 The Message

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.

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Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it.

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Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

That's what *servicing the Lord* looks like.

Practicing God's Presence

God's messengers:

When we cultivate that First Love, when we keep the fire of the Spirit hot and bright in our lives, when we commit ourselves to serving Him only, we find our true calling:

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2 Corinthians 4:5b-6 The Message

All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus for you. It started when God said, "Light up the darkness!" and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful.

God's New Creation bursts into the darkness and brokenness of this old world. And we are the light bearers.

Practicing God's Presence:

But this only happens when we learn to *practice God's Presence in our lives*. It means setting aside time *just for Him*. It means learning to hear His voice speaking to us in our heart and mind. It means walking in obedience to what He shows us and says to us. It means not just falling in love with Him, but *staying in love – first love every day*.

"A Place for You" is a place where anyone who comes will see that God's people are wildly in love with Him – and they can be as well.