

**FIRST SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT - OF ORTHODOXY**  
**Restoration of the Holy Icons**  
**John 1:43-51**

**By Archpriest Peter Olsen**  
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All of us would like to find peace and happiness. At the same time, we all have our own personal problems that weigh us down. In order to find this elusive happiness, we might be tempted to change our jobs, move to another location, or perhaps try to change the circumstances that we think might be the reason for our unhappiness. We say that what we are doing is seeking, but at the same time, aren't we really trying to escape? In our pursuit of happiness and peace, aren't we really trying to run away from not only our problems, but in actuality, aren't we trying to run away from ourselves? Such an escape is not the answer, because no matter what we change or where we go, we cannot escape ourselves. For you see, brothers and sisters, we live in a fallen world, and we are all broken people. This is the reality which is at the root of our lack of peace with others and within ourselves. Of course I am not saying that we should be indifferent to what career we choose or where we live, but I am saying that problems and difficult circumstances are part of life, no matter where we live or what we do.

Now that we have established that we cannot run away from ourselves and problems, what is the answer? On the first Sunday of Great Lent we celebrate the restoration of the veneration of the holy icons. For over a hundred years the Orthodox were forbidden to venerate the holy icons, until the year 843, at the Seventh Ecumenical Council, when the Orthodox doctrine of the veneration of the icons was restored. Now getting back to my question: as broken people, how do we find true peace and happiness? In order to understand the answer to this question, we must first understand the nature of our brokenness before we can concentrate on how to fix it. Man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God. The word "icon" means image. We are created to be beautiful living icons of Christ in the midst of the world. The ugliness of pride and sin mangles and distorts this image, and this is what causes our brokenness and our unhappiness. Just as the icons were restored today in the churches, which resulted in great joy and celebration, the image of God within us must be restored, and in this way we too will find great joy, peace and happiness. The next question is: how do we do this?

In answering this second question, I would first mention something that I believe all of us understand and can agree upon: it is not easy to be a Christian. It is not easy to be like God in holiness in every aspect of our lives. I did not say that it is impossible, but I do acknowledge that it is not easy. Still, Christ is the ideal that we should try to live up to in the best possible way that we can. Naturally, it is our duty to try to keep all the Christian commandments. However, today I would like to suggest one of the commandments that perhaps is not as difficult to fulfill and will greatly help to restore the image of Christ within us, as well as bring us great joy and happiness. "It is better to give than to receive," says the Lord. On Judgement Day the Lord will specifically ask us how well we fulfilled this particular commandment. This commandment should not seem impossible to anyone, and it is not like we are being asked to move mountains. The famous Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky realized this, and this is how he expressed it:

*The commandment of Christ "to love your neighbor as yourself" is impossible. On the earth we are bound by the law of individuality. We are impeded by the "I." Only Christ was able, but Christ, from everlasting to everlasting, is the ideal to which man must strive according to the laws of nature. Meanwhile, after the appearance of Christ as the ideal of man in the flesh, it became clear as day that the highest, final development of the individual must reach precisely*

*this...so that a person finds, realizes and is convinced with all the strength of his nature that the highest use that a person can make of his individuality, of the full development of his "I," is, as it were, to destroy this "I," to give it entirely to each and everyone, completely and wholeheartedly. And this is the greatest happiness... This is the paradise of Christ.*

Dostoevsky realized that if we have not already done so, then we should begin to reorient our desires toward the Lord and in the service of our neighbors. This is the surest and quickest way for us to become more beautifully the images of Christ that we were meant to be. This happens not by trying to flee from ourselves or relationships with others, but by offering our service to others for the sake of the Lord and for healing and blessing. When Dostoevsky writes about the destruction of the "I" and of our individuality, what he is speaking about is pride and the ego. He is not saying that we should destroy our identity as persons and who we are. What he realized is that in service and love for others we conquer selfishness and pride and actually build up our self-identity to the beauty and image of Christ. There is no other path to the Kingdom than to become a better icon of the Lord. Amen.

