Priests, ministers, and charities are often called upon to try to alleviate the sufferings of others, very often those in unforeseeable situations which lead to much financial distress. They try to give what they can and what their churches may be able to provide, as well as direct them to sources of possible governmental assistance. But, alas, often, it only scratches the surface of what is needed. We might cite a recent situation in which a young parent was fighting cancer with daily treatments and thus could not work. The spouse was doing the best she could balancing the care of their children, holding down a job, and juggling the bills. But all help they find is still insufficient.

Such situations came to mind while reviewing the Gospel for the Catholic Mass this weekend (July 10) in which Jesus elicits from a scholar of the Jewish law—and thus from ancient themes of the Old Testament—the two great commandments: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” (Jesus) replied to him, “You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.” (Luke 10.15) And, explicating in another place: “On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:40)

“...do this and you will live,” Jesus assures us. Of course, in the primary sense, He is referring to eternal life promised to God’s faithful, but also, one can’t help thinking that, even here in this earthly life, we only come to truly “live” when we give of ourselves for others. For the Christian faithful, for love of God; but for the non-believer, too, to experience the joy stemming from exercising charity toward the needy—loosening the grip on our resources and, likewise, our self-centeredness. To give to others not only material needs but promoting such things which are truly right and good—all of which necessarily are from God, especially His commands and instruction to us.

But, first and foremost, how does the Christian observe the first great commandment? Very much as a small child loves his earthly parents—by observing, following and trusting what they teach and accomplishing what is asked of him. We read in three Gospels almost the exact same admittance of Jesus: “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” (Mark 10.15)

Of course, as is often remarked, Jesus doesn’t mean a child-ish faith, but a child-like faith—one that trusts in God and in His Word—scripture being affirmed by Jesus’ use of it. And, does not St. John tell us, and as we hear so often in this column: “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” (1 John 5:3)

For, as in our psalm at the Mass:

“The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul; the decree of the LORD is trustworthy, giving wisdom to the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, rejicing the heart; the command of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eye. ...the ordinances of the LORD are true, all of them just. They are more precious than gold, than a heap of purest gold; sweeter also than syrup or honey from the comb.” (Psalm 19)

Now, in that Gospel to which we’ve previously referred, Jesus offers one of His best-known parables—that of the Good Samaritan. Why is it among His “best-loved”? Because of the charity and brotherly love/concern exhibited therein—one in dire need being assisted even by one who had no pressing reason to assist—a person normally despised by the Israelites: a Samaritan. But in a heart-warming example of empathy over enmity, the Samaritan lays aside ancestral animosity to do what is good—seeing in the broken man not an adversary but rather a brother.

The reader experiences how such selfless “love of neighbor,” even in mind’s eye hearing a parable, “refreshes the soul,” as mentioned in the psalm above. So, if even in our imagination the story warms us, how much more so can it do in reality ... when WE act as the charitable and good Samaritan?

In scriptures, we read God’s command: “None shall appear before me empty-handed.” (Exodus 23:15) Our offerings are not so much gold and silver per se, but God rather desires the offering of obedience to His will, which is all good, and the offerings of a charitable heart and hand to those less fortunate. As Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40); and “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you ... By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

So, we must: “Will I appear before God empty-handed ... having looked after only myself in this life? Or, have I truly imitated the love of God for us—as Jesus, who sacrificed Himself for the world’s salvation? If Jesus offered His life, can I not offer to succor the needy in this life? Will the angels smile—or scowl—as I come to the throne?” And thus, we need remember when we see another in true need: O men, how long will your hearts be closed, will you love what is futile and seek what is false? (Psalm 4:2)

Who’s he? And we will call him blessed, for he has done wonderful things among his people. ... Who has had the power to transgress and did not transgress, and to do evil and did not do it? His prosperity will be established, and the assembly will relate his acts of charity. (Sirach 3:19-11)