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SUNDAY READING.

THE

BEGGARLY BOY,

A PARABLE.



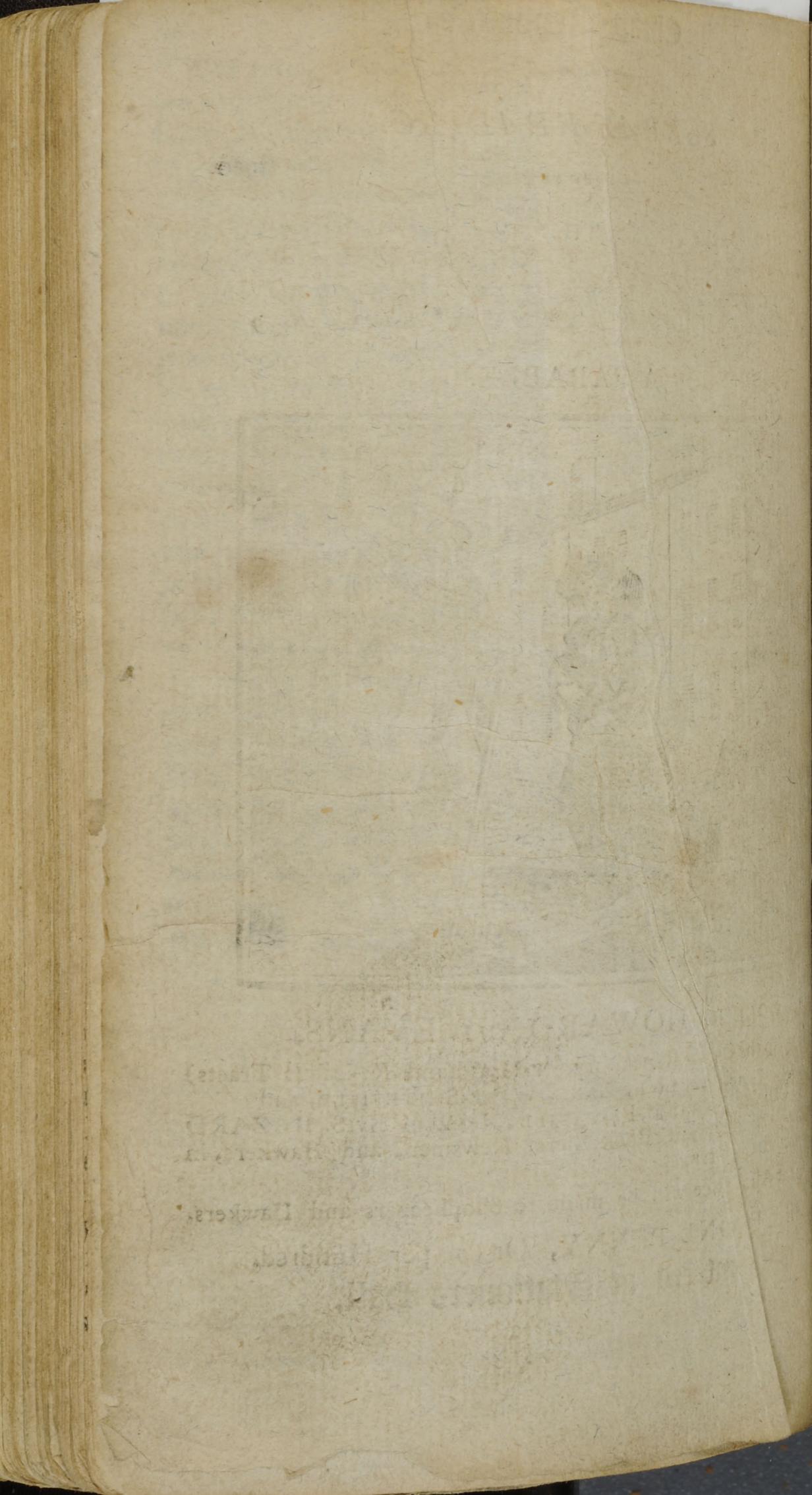
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THE

BEGGARLY BOY,

A PARABLE.



ONCE on a time a poor beggarly boy, who used to carry matches about the streets, was met by a very rich and worthy gentleman, who observing his hollow eyes, his sallow looks, and his bent body, as well as the extreme filth with which he was covered, was touched with such compassion for the lad, that he was disposed to render him some effectual relief; and accordingly the gentleman dropt a hint, that he had a mind to do something considerable for him. The boy, never expecting any such goodness as this, and indeed not listening very attentively did not at first understand what was said; upon which the gentleman spoke more plainly to him, asking him whether he had a mind to have his dirty rags exchanged for a new livery coat and some clean linen? "for," said he, "if you have a mind to it, I will take you into my service; and in that case I shall fit you out afresh, and I shall take care that your health is looked after, and when

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you

have served me faithfully, for a few years, which you may do very comfortably to yourself, I will even set you up in life." The lad after this could not help understanding the offer: but he seemed as far as ever from accepting it, for he was now quite unwilling to believe the gentleman; and he shewed by his manner that he would have been better pleased to have sold a halfpennyworth of matches in his usual way, carrying off the halfpenny in his hand, than to have had all the fine promises which the best and richest man in the world could make to him.

This kind gentleman, however, persisting in his inclination to do the lad a service, proceeded next to reason with him; he advised him, for his own sake, to listen a little more to what was said, and then remarked to him how ill he looked, which the boy though very dangerously sick, was not sensible of himself; and represented to him the difference between leading the wretched sort of life he did, and getting into a regular and comfortable service. Nay, he went so far as even to beg and entreat him, at the same time observing that he had no objection to the lad's satisfying himself that the person who addressed him was no cheat or impostor; and, in proof of it, he told him his name, informed him how he might learn all particulars of his character, and gave him a direction to his place of abode. In short, he condescended to say every thing that could, in any case, be supposed necessary to give a poor man confidence and encouragement. In the course of this conversation I should have observed that the gentleman was a proof of his generosity, throwing in his countenance, but with no

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small conceit at his own quickness, and cleverness
 seizing hold of it; after which, he grew as proud
 as could be of having got possession of the piece of
 money, not considering at all that it was a mere
 present, and that he had not given the gentleman a
 single match for it out of his basket.

I am persuaded my readers will, by this time,
 be aware that this was a lad who had a very mean
 and low mind; otherwise, he would undoubtedly
 have been over joyed at such an opportunity of
 getting above his present base condition; besides
 which, I should remark, that he had been a long
 time living among a set of rogues and vagabonds,
 who being one of them nearly as bad as another,
 and having seldom seen among them any persons
 of a different character, had learnt to fancy them-
 selves a very creditable sort of people, and, when
 they got together, were just as proud, in their way,
 as if they had been the greatest lords and dukes in
 the kingdom. At night the lad went home, and
 slept among these old companions, in a vile un-
 wholesome room, where, though each would affect
 now and then to be merry and gay, yet, in fact,
 they were all of them dying by inches, and in the
 judgment of any rational or feeling man, who
 might condescend to put his head in among them,
 they undoubtedly were altogether in as sorrowful
 and wretched a plight as can well be imagined.

In short then, with grief and pain do I speak it,
 this poor beggarly boy entirely neglected the pro-
 digious offer which had been made to him; he re-
 turned to his former company, continued in his
 petty trade, and dragged on the little remainder
 of his life in the old way, just as if nothing had
 happened.

I now propose, by means of this story, which is mere allegory or parable, to expose the conduct of those persons who are unwilling to comply with the gracious invitations of our Saviour in his gospel for He is that kind and willing friend (with reverence be it spoken) who offers to take us mean and needy creatures into his service, and we, if we turn away and refuse the offer, may be likened to this foolish beggarly boy, having nothing better to plead, as I think I shall be able to shew, than one or other of those very excuses, which, when put in his mouth, have appeared so absurd and monstrous.

Let us see whether there is not some general likeness between the two cases. I will begin by supposing our Saviour in his gospel, to address himself to a man who is quite thoughtless and unbelieving. Now such persons are commonly much more wicked than they imagine, for by following their natural inclinations, and taking no thought to their ways, they permit a thousand evil dispositions to grow upon them; the consequence of this is, that when the gospel first meets with such persons, it finds them quite covered over with wickedness, as this boy was with dirt; though, like him, they are unconscious of it. It commonly finds them also eagerly engaged in some poor pursuit of this life, as this boy was in selling matches.

I would next observe, that, in general, when the vast and unspeakable offers of the gospel are first mentioned in the ears of such a person as I have been describing, his mind is so ill prepared for the subject, and his thoughts are apt to be so completely turned another way, that he does not probably understand, nor even listen to what is said to him, just like this boy, who, when he was first spoken to

refused to listen to the gentleman, and continued to think of nothing but his common traffic.

But let us next suppose the man to have the gospel more clearly explained to him; he is now invited to put off his sins, which have been represented by the filth and dirt, to enter into the service, and put on, as it were, the livery of Christ, as his acknowledged servant, and after spending the short period of his life on earth in a state of comfortable and willing obedience to his Deliverer and Redeemer, he is then told to expect that he shall be raised to Heaven, and that he shall be made happy for ever and ever. How astonishing is this proposal! What then is the next difficulty? It is this, that the worldly man will not believe the truth of the promise which is held out to him, like the offer to this beggarly boy, it seems too good to be true, or, rather, it is too vast to be conceived by him. "Why should this great gentleman trouble himself to think of me, or to do so much to serve me," said the foolish boy in the fable. "Why should the great God stoop so low to me, or think of sending his son from Heaven to save me?" says the fool who disbelieves the Bible. The boy therefore, turned again, to his own way, notwithstanding the offer he has met with; and the worldly man is for doing the same, though he has heard of the invitation of the gospel; for he wants faith to trust in God, as the other did to trust the gentlemen his benefactor, and he therefore esteems the smallest of the good things of this life, the meekest "half-penny in hand," to be more than eternal happiness in expectation.

But let us see how the gospel condescends even to our infirmity. The kind gentleman was repre-

sented as reasoning with this dull and distrustful lad, informing him also of the steps which he ought to take as the means of satisfying his doubts, and of getting possession, at length, of the blessing. He appealed also to the lad's own experience of the hardships of his present condition, warning him also of his future danger, and assuring him, at the same time, of the mild nature of that service to which he was invited; and after answering every objection, the gentleman condescended even to implore and intreat this poor miserable fellow, that, for his own sake, he would not remain inattentive to the offer.

So it is with the gospel: it stoops, as it were, to all our weaknesses and infirmities; it calls to us at the first, with an inviting voice, to come forward and approach it: for we are not expected to receive every truth at once; still less are we required to believe without evidence: for, in the proposals of the gospel, every thing is fair, as well as plain and practicable. It does not ask us, for instance, to effect any thing without sufficient means for it, to make bricks without straw, to strive without hope of success, or to do what is impossible for us: On the contrary, we are asked only to shew a willing mind, and to use those plain and simple means which the gospel itself sets before us: as for example, we are called upon to read the scriptures, to attend upon the preaching of the gospel, and whatever may be the other religious advantages, either of good books or christian friends, which are put in our way, we are required to make an honest and diligent use of them, than which nothing surely can be more just and reasonable; and then, because after all we are so weak and helpless, we are only

told the more particularly to pray to God for his grace to assist us.

Again, how does the gospel also appeal to our experience, as the gentleman did to the beggarly boy's experience of the misery of his condition. Have we never smarted in consequence of those sins which we have fallen into through our neglect of the gospel? Have we never found ourselves afflicted, destitute, and even miserable for the want of it? Have we never known an hour when the merciful help and protection of an heavenly Father would have proved a comfort and a blessing to us? Yet how can we expect to enjoy this protection in the time of our necessity, if instead of entering into his family, we chuse like this helpless and inconsiderate boy, to place ourselves at a distance? Hear then how the gospel calls to us to cast ourselves on the care of our Redeemer, "Come unto me" (says Christ) all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest; take my yoke upon you, for my yoke is easy and my burthen is light, and ye shall find rest unto your souls." How does our Saviour also, in the same manner as was said of the benevolent man in the parable, turn suppliant, as it were, to the sinner. "Ye will not come unto me that ye might have life."—"Why will ye die, O house of Israel."—"We therefore" (says the Apostle) as an ambassador for Christ, beseech you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." Thus then, after all the encouragements of the gospel, we still turn away from it, and resolve to do without it, all the miserable consequences which will follow must be laid at our own door; and whenever the day of our extremity shall come, we

shall be forced to own, that we are left, like this boy, entirely without excuse.

It has been remarked in the story, that the same gentleman who made this great offer to the beggarly boy, threw him down a shilling in token of his liberality, for which the lad never thought of thanking him but merely grew proud upon it, as well as conceited of his own cleverness in catching hold of the piece. What a very mean spirit was this! and yet is not this the very spirit in which worldly minded men receive temporal blessings thrown down to them by their heavenly Father? If a little worldly wealth is cast by a bounteous Providence into their lap, they immediately grow haughty in consequence of it, and, like this boy, they take to themselves credit for the ability they have shewn in the manner of getting possession of it: Many men, for instance, if they get a good crop, or a good year's trade, are as full of themselves, and as thoughtless of Him who is the giver of it, as this boy was; nor are they at all encouraged by God's providential goodness to look up to Him for the further blessings of the gospel.

Reader, if thou art vain of any of thine earthly goods, thou mayest behold thy likeness in this part of the character of the boy!

We come now more particularly to speak of the causes which lead men to act the strange part they do in rejecting the gospel. I doubt not that this foolish lad might find a thousand plausible reasons, in his own mind, by which he might disguise from himself the folly and absurdity of his conduct. He might say as it has been already hinted, "I do not chuse to venture on all this change in my way of life. I am afraid of giving myself up so entirely

to the gentleman." Poor foolish fellow! what then hadst thou any thing to lose by the change? Could such a lad as thou wast be meaner, dirtier, or poorer than thou wast already? In like manner we may say to every sinner, who raises a like objection; what then art thou fearful of becoming wickeder than thou art, by entering into the service of Christ? Is it that thy conscience pricks thee in proportion as thou drawest nearer to him? Art thou afraid on this account to make the venture?

Or the lad might say, perhaps, as the sinner is apt to say, I have lived hitherto in my present way of life, and why should I not go on in it? which is but saying, in other words, I have lived hitherto in dirt, or I have lived hitherto in sin, and why may I not live on in it? than which there cannot be a more miserable reason, though I fear there is hardly a more common one.

But let us, I said, lay open the true cause. We have already observed, that this boy had long dwelt in the company of a sad set of vagabonds, who being very numerous, and one of them as bad as another, contrived to keep each other in countenance, so as to pass, forsooth, for very decent people. This is exactly the case with the multitude of wicked and worldly-minded people. They live in great flocks together, they see none but those who are much like themselves, and they have no more idea of a truly christian life, than this boy had of the sort of life led in the family of this great gentleman, so that when the gospel calls to them to repent, and change their course, and enter into the service of Christ, they see no need for it, they are as good as their neighbors, and having no other rule of judg-

ing except this, they pronounce themselves to be well enough already. . But I would wish such persons to reflect on the error of this boy, and to recollect, that many a coat which seems clean enough to a poor man, appears very dirty in the eyes of a delicate gentleman, and that, in like manner, many a life which a worldly person thinks innocent, appears to be a very wicked one in the eyes of a christian.

The grand cause of all, however, which makes men reject the gospel, is one which must be traced still further. It was remarked of this boy, that he had no heart for the sort of benefit which was offered him, for that he had a very mean and low mind: he had therefore not merely fallen into bad company, but he had chosen it: he was not only used to dirt, but he really loved it, he had no delight in cleanliness, for his taste, unhappily, lay quite the other way.

Now this, when it is considered, will serve to explain very clearly the several circumstances in his conduct, and it will also account very sufficiently for his entire refusal of the offer. His rudeness in not attending to the gentleman when he first called to him, as well as his continual absence of mind afterwards, his difficulty in believing any thing that could be said of him, his false reasoning upon it, his seeming dullness and ingratitude, and insensibility, as well as the bad choice which he made of his company, may all be traced, directly, or indirectly, to this principal cause, that the lad was a poor low-lived fellow that loved to grovel in the dirt, and had no kind of heart or inclination to get into a good service.

And need we fear to remark, that in this also the likeness holds, and that we have here especially the exact picture of the irreligious person.

It is often pleaded, by those who would defend the characters of irreligious people, that one man, for instance, happens merely to be rather inattentive to the gospel; that another is unfortunately drawn out of the way of it by what is thought an innocent attention to his worldly business; a third gravely tells you that he finds a difficulty in believing it; a fourth contrives some way or other to pervert it, so as to get no good from it, and seems to have a strange twist in his head whenever he reasons upon it; a fifth is said to be a man who is without those warm feelings, which are supposed to distinguish those who affectionately embrace it; and of a seventh perhaps it is said by some simple good natured relation, or acquaintance, that the man has a good heart indeed, but that unluckily he has fallen into bad company; but let it be remembered, that just thus it might be pleaded, that this beggarly boy was by turns inattentive and wrong-headed and dull of feeling, as well as used to bad company. These excuses if allowed in the one instance should be allowed equally in the other. The true root of the matter in each case lies deeper. The irreligious man, like the boy in the parable, has, in the worst sense of the words, a base and low mind: like him, he has no heart for the great things that are offered him; he has no heart for the favor of God, for the honour of living in his service, for the comforts of the gospel in this world, or for the gift of eternal life. Like the beggarly boy, he may say what he will, but he is of an earthly, grovelling spirit, and the true explanation of the

whole matter is, that as the one is inclined to dirt, so the other has a leaning to the side of sin. Do you think that if this beggarly boy had loved cleanliness, and abominated every degree of dirt, he would have remained as he was? no, undoubtedly he would have caught at the opportunity offered him, and he would, as it were, at all hazards have run after the gentleman: so if a man longs to be freed from sin, if he wishes above all things to cleanse his ways, to purify himself even as God is pure, and to become holy as God is holy, do you think he will not catch at the Gospel? undoubtedly he will do so. Yes. for it will be suited in every part of it to the state of his mind, and to all his wants and wishes, and therefore why should he not receive it? he will feel his way indeed, but he will by degrees heartily embrace every doctrine of it. This then is the man who will accept God for his father, Christ for his savior, the Holy Spirit for his sanctifier and comforter; the scriptures will be his guide; the world will be no more to him than the place of his pilgrimage; his fellow-christians will be viewed by him as his fellow-travellers, and Heaven will be his home, where he hopes to be joined to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to dwell in the presence of his Maker, and of his Savior, for ever and ever.

And now, Reader, if thou art one who hast hitherto been a stranger to religion, and hast gone thy dull and daily round without any thought of the matter, for once thou hast been met methinks on thy way like this beggarly boy, by a voice of exhortion. Even in this little tale, the offer of the gospel, perhaps rather unexpectedly, hath been held out to thee, or some hint at least may have

been given, by which, if thou wilt, thou shalt assuredly find in the end that thy old condition shall be altered; and yet, perhaps, like this beggarly boy, thou art now returning for the remainder of this very day, to thy old habits, just as if thou hadst not read this story. Some business calls thee, or some pleasure waits thee, so farewell to all thoughts of the gospel, for thou must be gone. But methinks, as thou departest, thy heart should approve of this beggarly boy, should admire his wisdom, and praise the turn of his spirit, for if thou goest away condemning him, thou condemnest thyself also—Oh! no: his case is too bad to be defended; for he, who in a worldly sense, *refuses a good offer*, is set down for a fool, by common consent of all men. But, ah! how few will be persuaded to use the same reasoning in religion, which they apply to all their worldly matters! how few will see with the same eyes, and try by the same rule, their temporal and their eternal interests! so true is that saying of the scriptures, “that the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light.”



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