E-MAIL HOAXES
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Within the past few years, e-mail has become so commonplace that nearly everyone has access to it. Personally, I love e-mail, and I spend a fair portion of my day either reading or writing e-mail messages. But with the splendor of e-mail also comes the potential for abuse -- just like the "junk mail" (spam) we all receive in our other mailboxes every day. I'd like to address here what I believe to be another important area of concern. Occasionally, I receive e-mail messages from friends, co-workers, family members, and sometimes total strangers that are purely HOAXES. They are not true, but most people never take the time to verify them -- they just click the "Forward" button and send them on to others. The content may vary: some are warning me about something, some are letting me in on a valuable secret, or dozens of other possible themes. While some are indeed true, too many are absolutely FALSE, and if we contribute to spreading them, how is that different than gossip or verbally telling lies?

Most of you are probably already aware that many destructive computer viruses are spread through e-mail attachments. While these hoaxes aren't as immediately destructive as a virus, they do cause problems of another sort. Some of the hoaxes DO have viruses attached to them, as well. [You should always be leery of <u>any</u> message with attachments.]

I strongly urge you to consider what I'm saying, and take a few extra minutes every time you receive some new message to VERIFY it before you forward it. As Christians, we are just as obligated to be truthful in e-mail as we are in our speech. To assist you in that, I have included several reputable links at the bottom of this message, listing companies and other sources that can often confirm or deny the truthfulness of the message in question. Please take time to check out some of those sites.

It almost has become a pet peeve for me, because I have tried to gently educate friends and loved ones about this for years...yet every now and then it happens again. But I am confident that those who read this message – and fairly consider the matter – will be more careful. I doubt that any of us would intentionally perpetrate a "hoax," but some are just crafted in such a way as to deceive even the best of us!

I also want to say that I, too, like to share touching stories and good jokes every now and then -- I'm not totally against mass mailings...with a caveat – please see my ***"USE THE 'BCC:'..."*** message elsewhere.   But I just urge everyone to become more aware of the potential HARM that these can cause. I have researched this matter extensively during the past several years. In the early part of this decade, I was amazed how quickly this problem grew. I do think it has subsided in recent years. But on occasion, it resurfaces – usually with "newcomers" to the Internet (whether young or old). You may not see it as a problem, but many companies in fact are suffering problems with e-mail servers, reduced worker efficiency, and occasional viruses -- all spread by messages very much like the ones in question here.

Here are some brief, specific examples:

1) Recently, you may have received a message stating that Microsoft and AOL had teamed up, and they were "tracking" e-mails. The message claims that they will actually pay you if you forward the message! But I can assure you, neither company tracks e-mails as the message claims, and you won't get any money from them. This is a typical form of "social engineering" used by hoaxsters, virus writers, and spammers in an effort to get people to react and distribute their message.
Here are some links where you can read about this popular hoax:
>   http://www.hoax-slayer.com/ms-money-giveway-hoax.html
>   http://urbanlegends.about.com/library/blintelaol.htm
>   http://www.breakthechain.org/exclusives/msaol.html

Remember: If it sounds too good to be true, it's probably a hoax! *In fact, it's safe to say that over 95% of such forwarded messages are hoaxes, so I urge you to verify (or debunk) the story before you forward it!*

2) One e-mail pertained to helping find a lost boy. It was a legitimate story, but the boy was found the very next day, yet the e-mail has proliferated and continues to bounce around the Internet for years! What harm, you say? The law enforcement agencies are begging that people stop responding with inquiries. The problem is that few people take the time to check out the source of the story -- they just hit the "FORWARD" button and send it off to 10 more people.

The lesson for us: if at all possible, verify the **accuracy** of the story and the **currency** of the story before propagating a message, no matter how well-meaning and/or legitimate it may seem.

3) There was a story (in various forms) about the American Cancer Society donating money for every e-mail sent on behalf of some poor, sick girl -- the ACS has issued a statement denouncing the story. If you still doubt this, go to their web-site statement at:
http://www.cancer.org/docroot/MED/content/MED_6_1x_Jessica_Mydek.asp?sitearea=MED

4) Many of you no doubt have received the "$250 cookie recipe" from Neiman-Marcus. For starters, it's a hoax story. For more details, research it at some of the links below. It may be a good cookie recipe, but it's still a hoax, and we have no business spreading it. The gist of the message is that some woman was angry at Neiman-Marcus, so she decided to publicize their 'secret' cookie recipe in revenge. Even if it was true, would it be Christian-spirited of us to help this poor lady get vengeance by distributing their trade secret?

There are also dozens (probably hundreds) of seemingly simple, harmless e-mails like the "e-mail snowball fight" -- and they indeed may be harmless. But what if one of these is carrying a malicious virus? People are going to be so conditioned at hitting the "FORWARD" button that it's going to cover the world in a day. There already have been messages (such as the "free vacation from Microsoft and Disney") that actually were malicious, secretly providing hackers somewhere else in the world with access to thousands of computer systems, including some sensitive information. It didn't affect everyone, but we don't want to innocently pass these on to other people who might be affected by the viruses.

Sometimes, people argue that it is "better to be safe than sorry," so they feel justified in forwarding a message to as many people as possible...quickly. It may be an e-mail warning about a potential virus, or it may be an e-mail regarding some "AMBER ALERT" situation (a lost child, for example). The e-mail has a sense of urgency that compels us to take it at face value and send it **immediately**. ***However, I disagree with that "better safe than sorry" philosophy...at least when it comes to e-mail.*** It usually only takes a minute or two to confirm or debunk the e-mail's claim, so why wouldn't a Christian choose to do that? Why would we want to cater to the hoax-writer? What if we actually cause more <u>harm</u> by sending it out to dozens of other people? I recall two specific examples where hoaxes claimed that certain files by the name of "sulfnbk.exe" and "jdbgmgr.exe" were viruses, and the hoax message instructed users on how to delete those two files from their computer! Many people innocently followed those instructions....only to find out later that both files were <u>legitimate</u> files, part of Microsoft Windows! Deleting the files actually caused them further problems!

IF YOU ABSOLUTELY MUST FORWARD SOMETHING, one way to reduce the potential for harm is by selective "cut-&-paste" from the RECEIVED message into a NEW message. Or, if it is relatively short, just compose a new message from scratch.....and delete the RECEIVED message.

Even if there are no threatening attachments, just the sheer volume of e-mail space and the "bandwidth" they consume (which affects overall Internet speed for everyone) should cause us to be more selective in what and how much we send out. Just like you get tired of continual junk mail in your U. S. Post Office box, so it is with "junk" e-mail. Recent estimates say that approximately 80% of all e-mails are "spam" or trivial forwarded messages!

I'll close with the following information on the next page, gathered from a number of reputable sources on the Internet. I would urge everyone to take just one hour some day and visit as many of these sites as you can. Read their literature; read about the hundreds of e-mail scams, hoaxes, and even some genuine viruses. I suspect that many people won't bother to verify any of these links, but I hope you will -- besides, I think you will find much of it to be fascinating reading...

Hopefully, this list will give you plenty of tools for researching hoaxes, urban legends, and other forms of half-truths or falsehoods that traverse the Internet. If you have questions about how to use these web sites, or if you have questions about anything I've said here in this message, feel free to contact me. My goal is not to embarrass anyone, nor is it to put a damper on your e-mail usage – I just want don't want to see anyone deceived or embarrassed by someone else's hoax message.

Most of these links pertain to HOAX e-mails, but there's plenty of good information here that everyone should read if they are going to enter the e-mail world. I originally compiled this list on 6/15/99 (and updated on 10/25/06). Some of these sources are more reputable than others. I have ordered them, loosely, from HIGHEST to LOWEST credibility.

[If you discover that one of these links is no longer working, contact me at: ldwellman@cox.net]

The makers of McAfee VirusScan software --
　　http://us.mcafee.com/virusInfo/default.asp?id=hoaxes

The makers of Norton Anti-Virus software --
　　http://www.symantec.com/enterprise/security_response/threatexplorer/risks/hoaxes.jsp

The makers of F-Prot Anti-Virus software --
　　http://www.f-secure.com/hoaxes/

The U. S. Government site, Computer Incident Advisory Capability (by the Dept. of Energy) --
　　http://hoaxbusters.ciac.org/

The American Cancer Society -- see their denouncement of hoaxes about a poor, dying girl --
　　http://www.cancer.org/docroot/MED/content/MED_6_1x_Jessica_Mydek.asp?sitearea=MED
Other medical hoaxes debunked on the American Cancer Society website --
　　http://www.cancer.org/docroot/MED/MED_6_1_Rumors.asp

Snopes – great resource for debunking many hoaxes and "urban legends" --
　　http://www.snopes.com/

Hoax-Slayer – another great resource --
　　http://www.hoax-slayer.com/

Another interesting list of hoaxes and urban legends --
　　http://urbanlegends.about.com/od/internet/a/current_netlore.htm

Another interesting site --
　　http://diamond-back.com/emailhoaxes.html

Yet another thorough site regarding hoaxes --
　　http://vmyths.com/hoax.cfm?id=16&page=3

Many of these sites have "search" capability, where you can enter a few words and quickly locate something about your suspect message....and with the advent of "Google," you can usually debunk just about any hoax in a matter of seconds – just go to http://www.google.com and perform a search of a few key words in the message!