

BEWARE OF E-MAIL SCAMS

I am not joining the Chicken Little flock in this mailout. However, there are some scams so evident they hardly parade in sheep's clothing. They look and howl like wolves so as to scare any sane person away -- we would think!. But they are taking many millions of dollars from Americans. Some take advantage of greed while others play on sympathy and good will.

For a year or more I have received a growing number of exciting offers from NIGERIA. Some tell in more sophisticated terminology how the person writing the letter has come to be in charge of a vast sum of money, as much as \$250,000,000. It is a trust which he wants to get out of the country. He needs me to help him by letting it be transferred into my bank account. For my help he will give me a fabulous portion amounting into the millions of dollars. Some have claimed to be Christians (even converts from Islam) and they want to give me millions of dollars for evangelism.

The old observation that "if it sounds too good to be true, it usually is" should steer anyone away from such an offer. For that reason, I have not warned others. But I am learning that so many Americans have been taken in by it that it has become a cash cow for many Nigerian crooks. A recent report in The Oregonian told of a widow in Oregon who had been fleeced for \$70,000 and a dentist in our state had lost \$100,000. They estimate that many millions have been sucked out of American bank accounts making this scam a thriving business in Nigeria. No international law regulates the internet, so they are beyond our reach, either for recovery of funds or punishment for their crimes..

Those scams thrive on our greed. Others play on our sympathy and feelings of guilt because of our affluence. These emails describe the pitiful plight of a person or family due to sickness, persecution, or calamity of some sort. The person / family is destitute and totally impoverished, perhaps in need of money for medical treatment, or even travel expense in preaching the gospel.

Those pleas are more difficult to deal with. Their needs may be actual. A few dollars from us would go a long way in a third-world country. Shall I be hard-hearted? Shall I turn away from the needs of the desperate?

A few questions are in order. Do destitute persons in an impoverished society have access to a computer? Do they even know about email? Granting that they do, how did they get my name and email address? These pleas come in very broken English. But con artists know how to make their message seem legitimate. Vast numbers of email addresses may be purchased cheaply for mass mailing at very little cost. These addresses which target specific segments of society can be purchased.

OK, you had rather send \$25.00 than to risk turning a destitute person away, you say. But suppose that only one out of each hundred persons on the mailout list sends that much money. By sending that money you have helped to make the recipient wealthy overnight! And news of his discovery of the gravy train spreads so that it becomes a thriving

business. Now, whom have you really helped in “helping” that person? You have only helped yourself if you have learned from your mistaken gullibility!

During my career working for congregations, I was faced constantly with the difficult problem of persons coming with pleas for help. Many were legitimate cases. But I am convinced by evidence that most of them were unscrupulous people going from church to church taking advantage of the liberality of Christian people. They were skilled in deceit using all the tricks in the trade to touch your sympathy. In a number of cases, I learned later that they used the money given them for beer or drugs. So we learned to give groceries instead of money.

We cannot possibly answer all the pleas for help in our world. Although it may be painful, we have to turn a deaf ear to many worthy causes. So, since we are limited in our resources, we should contribute where we have assurance that our money will be used properly. That is only common sense which need not be blinded by impulse.

Many times I have offered applicants use of the office telephone to call family, church, or friends so they could wire them some money. Not one person ever accepted my offer. No half-decent person is going to be allowed to starve by their family, their church, or their friends. So why do they pick on strangers? You know the answer.

While on this subject, I want to mention another example of lack of ethics. Suppose a pharmaceutical company were to post an advertisement for weight loss pills, Viagra, vitamins, and other products in your yard without your permission. Or Microsoft paints a software ad on your roof. Or your house is used as a billboard for some get-rich-quick scheme. Or pornography is advertised on your mailbox. How would you feel about that? I think we all can very well anticipate your answer.

Such a practice would be odious, unethical, and dishonest. Yet it is common for different ones to use my email and my Guest Book for their commercial purposes. If they use mine without permission, they probably use yours also. I certainly have no intention of buying anything from such persons and I hope you do not reward their thievery of the space I purchase for my spiritual outreach.

The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Let us beware of those who would pick our pockets and bank accounts or get a free commercial ride on the backs of spiritual endeavors.

Many stories, amazing but fictitious, are forwarded widely by unsuspecting and gullible email users. These are stories created by sick minds who want to make religious people look gullible and stupid. And they succeed! So be cautious about forwarding them. There are web sites where you can check the authenticity of many of these widely circulated stories. Try <www.urbanlegends.about.com> or <www.truthorfiction.com>.

(Cecil Hook; November 2002) []

