

## Forwarding Foolishness

By Paul R. Blake

*(I recently received the following question from a Dear Sister and replied to it. The question is relevant to how Christians should conduct themselves in the contemporary public forum that is the Internet - prb)*

"I'm sending you a forwarded message, and I have a question about it. I keep getting these emails and sometimes text messages from people who are obviously superstitious. I don't believe a person can have faith and trust in the Lord AND be superstitious. Please correct me if I'm wrong. I usually delete these emails because I don't know what I should do, but perhaps that's not what's best. If I know to do good and don't do it then it is sin. I understand that scripture but, I still don't really KNOW what to do except ask for some advice. The only verse I really found on superstitions was Acts 17:22. I would like to reply back to some of these people, but sometimes fear I could make things worse. I still pray for courage with confidence. Is it best to ignore it, or is it best to send a reply? No one ever asks me my opinion and I definitely do not want to appear opinionated and turn people away. For now I'll ignore it, but I would greatly appreciate some advice concerning this matter."

"Here is the forwarded message: 'You were chosen to receive this novena. Look at this closely. The President of Argentina received this picture and called it "junk mail," and 8 days later his son died. A man received this picture & immediately sent out copies. His surprise was winning the lottery. Another man received this picture, gave it to his secretary to make copies but they forgot to distribute them: She lost her job & he lost his family. This picture is miraculous & sacred.'"

With regard to your question about the email forwards, permit me to respond with the following:

1) Emails of this nature are forwarded hundreds of thousands, possibly millions of times over the years. By odds alone, some recipients will have bad things happen and others will have good things happen. What of the millions of people who have nothing unusual happen? You do not hear of them, just the exceptions. The odds explain the anomalies.

2) Forwarding emails is considered bad "netiquette" (Internet etiquette). It wastes bandwidth, increases email volume thus slowing transfer, and is little more than spamming on an individual basis.

3) More often than not, such messages are frauds, sometimes called "Psychological viruses" or "hillbilly viruses." That is, the creators do not have the knowledge and training to create a real virus, so they write an email message that plays on the weaknesses, superstitions, emotions, or gullibility of people to get it replicated and spread throughout the 'Net. And for those messages that are real (rare), often the issue is outdated. I still get messages circulated (and sometimes updated) from the 1990's.

4) It is not my intent to be unkind, but far too many people on the 'Net function at the emotional rather than rational level. They would rather do something that feels right, rather than do the thing that is right. For example, viruses rarely pass through systems protected by updated, reputable antivirus software (McAfee, Norton, AVG, etc.), unless a person is foolish enough to respond to unsolicited messages. And yet, we are constantly bombarded with messages by well meaning, but somewhat clueless people who forward virus warnings, 99% of which are virus hoaxes (another form of a hillbilly virus; see Snopes or V-Myths).

5) This is important. Forwarded emails contain the email addresses of every person it was forwarded to in the past, whether visible or embedded. And most people have the ability to view all of the email addresses in a forwarded message (it is a matter of two clicks of the mouse). While most people will ignore the other email addresses, there are unscrupulous people who will harvest the email addresses from a seemingly innocent forward and use them

for not so innocent purposes: they may collect them to form a list of addresses and sell them to spammers, or they might even be collected by e-stalkers. The question is, do you want people you do not know around the world passing around your email address to other people you do not know, doing things with it that you do not want to happen? If you truly feel compelled to forward an email, first delete all of the email addresses in the headers in the message body. This is a courtesy to the people who do not want their email addresses forwarded, a courtesy to the receiver who has to wade through pages of headers to find the message, and a courtesy to all web users as it will reduce congestion and bandwidth waste.

Here is my counsel, Dear One:

1) Delete every email that asks you to forward it to others. Especially messages that warn you that bad things will happen if you don't or good things will happen if you do. What is the difference between this and carrying a rabbit's foot or some other charm to ward off evil or any other practice or ritual used by the superstitious that replaces simple faith in God? Faithful Christians trust in God and believe His word. As a product of that faith, Christians know that empty rituals and tokens have no more power for good or evil today than they had in the past. Good or evil will not be engaged by what we do with an email sent by a random stranger or a well-meaning friend. In the Dark Ages, people thought they could keep witches away by spitting over their left shoulder and walking around the spittle three times in a counterclockwise circle. Is there any difference between that and what the forwarded messages say? For example: "One man received this picture and called it "junk mail" eight days later his son died. Another man received this picture and immediately Sent out copies. His surprise was winning the lottery." At the very best, this is nonsense. In reality, it is asking us to replace faith in God with trust in empty, and possibly harmful, ritual.

2) Never use your forward icon. At best, forwarding is bad manners; at worst is it helping perpetrate fraud. If you receive a message you really want to share with others, copy and paste only the message in an entirely new email, and address it yourself.

3) There are a few rules I follow that protects me from an endless stream of welling meaning warnings, adds time to my day by helping me avoid all of the "cute" messages that endlessly cycle around the 'Net, and protects my computer from viruses attached to emails or at recommended links.

a) I never save messages that have "forward" in the header or subject line. No exceptions... even if it comes from a family member or close friend. Quite often, I will glance at the content and not even read it. In all likelihood, the message had been circulating for some time, and I have already received it a number of times from others.

b) Without exception, I delete messages that ask me to visit some website. If the message contains a link, I automatically delete it regardless of who sent it. Malicious persons who collect addresses from "forwards" can generate messages to all of the persons in the message and send links that can take them to websites loaded with malware, data miners, viruses, or porn. Not a good idea. From a practical standpoint, it also saves me time and saves bandwidth.

c) I never forward anything, ever. If there is something I want to share (stories, news, jokes, etc.), I copy and paste it in a new message, and address it myself, and BCC (blind carbon copy) all of the addresses. Bad manners are bad manners whether at the dinner table or in an email; and, Christians conduct themselves with good manners.

d) I never open a file attached to a message unless I asked for it or know in advance it is coming. Unless this is the case, I delete the message.

In short, don't allow yourself to be bothered by emails that insist you take action. Nothing good or bad will happen if you ignore them that was or wasn't going to result from, as Solomon put it, "time and chance happen to all." I appreciate your tender conscience, my dear little sister. But in this matter, tell it to be at ease. There is no more power of fate in an email forward than there is in a 25 cent good luck charm that comes out of a bubble gum machine. Just delete

them and ignore them. Chances are the sender forwarded them to so many people, they probably won't notice if a few don't reply.