

The Gospel According to Hugh Hefner

I saw my first Playboy magazine when I was in Middle School. We lived on my grandparents' farm and my grandmother was my bus driver. In fact, my she parked the bus on the farm overnight, so I was the first on, last off. The second one on the bus was a kid named Mark. He lived on an acreage with his dad not too far from us. He didn't go to church, so he seemed weird to me. Why would you not go church?

I received a lot of my worldly education from Mark. He introduced me to secular music and to Playboy. Of course, this was way before the internet so the only way you could see pornography—at least in a small town—was magazines. Well, I didn't even know that kind of thing existed until one day he brought a few of his dad's magazines and we would hunch down in the back of the bus and look at them.

In fact, under the back seat of the bus, there was a metal box fastened to the floor that I assume was supposed to hold tools or accessories but was always empty. After a while, rather than bring the magazines with him every day, he just kept them in that box. It didn't seem like grandma ever looked in the box.

Well, I'd never seen anything like it, but I liked what I saw. I can remember a few times going over there in the evening, sneaking on the bus and pulling out those magazines. I didn't really even know what do to with it, but it was fascinating to me.

At that age, I had no idea who Hugh Heffner was, but it was hard to live in the U.S. for long without hearing about him. After all, he's a cultural icon. Heffner was born in Chicago in 1926 to a couple with roots in Nebraska. They were good Methodists, so they were quite conservative. His mom wanted him to be a missionary. Well, he ended up being a different kind of missionary—a missionary for the sexual revolution.

His death in September of 2017 spawned a flurry of magazine articles debating his legacy. Some praised him as a champion of the sexual revolution. He supported abortion rights and gay rights and free speech. Some saw him as a champion of women's equality—he saw himself as the liberator of women's sexuality.

He said this in an interview, *"Women have traditionally been either put on pedestals or damned as the source of all sexual temptation and sin. These are two sides of the same coin, since both place women in a nonhuman role. Playboy has opposed these warped sexual values and, in so doing, helped women step down from their pedestals and enjoy their natural sexuality as much as men."*

On his death, his admirers posted comments like, *"I'd like to say he's in a better place, but I highly doubt it."* Or his cartoon captures the sentiment of many. And this cartoon is a pretty clear picture of the Gospel According to Hugh Hefner. [hef-cartoon pic] Do you see that? There are even religious overtones to it—who needs heaven when you have the Playboy mansion? The Gospel According to Hugh Hefner is that *a person is most alive when you're free to gratify your every desire.*

Here's another example right from his own mouth. *"The religious heritage sort of suggests implicitly and explicitly that you pay your dues and you get your reward later on, that's a little inconsistent with the notion of personal, happiness. I am a strong believer in a set of values that are rooted in the notion of happiness and personal fulfillment."*

Or as he's most famously quoted, *"Life's too short to live someone else's dream."* It seems that he saw himself as a sort of evangelist for his idea of the good life—his gospel, if you will. And that's the "gospel" we're talking about today.

Now, we'll get to the critique here soon, but one thing we're trying to do while we're talking about these other gospels is think about why they might be appealing to people and to acknowledge where there might be something good in them even if they ultimately fall short of being the Gospel. So, let me mention a couple of good things that have come as a result.

The first good I see is that it brought the subject of sex out of the shadows. Now, of course there are huge downsides to this, but I think there is some good in that there was a time when we didn't talk openly about sex. It was a taboo subject, so people who were struggling with sexual issues, struggled in the shadows. While sexual sin and addiction has probably been ramped up on our modern age with the advent of internet pornography, sexual sin and struggle is as old as time. And struggling alone is almost never helpful.

The other good to come out of it is that our response to sexual sin tends to be much more gracious than it used to be. Of course, this isn't universal, but more and more,

churches and Christian families seem to be responding to things like teen pregnancy much more loving way. 50 years ago, it would have been common for a 17-year-old girl who got pregnant to be kicked out of her home or ostracized by the church and it drove people away from the church rather than showing them the grace of Jesus. We've learned that Biblical standards for sex aren't opposed to grace.

But the Gospel according to Hugh Hefner claims to liberate people, it has actually done a great deal of damage to our society and individuals within it. You see, the issue is a misunderstanding (or maybe an underestimation) of human desire. The Gospel According to Hugh Hefner encourages us to make our desires king. They become the standard by which we judge whether we're living the good life.

But what's often swept under the rug is the power of our desires to destroy us. I know that sounds dramatic, but let's take a look at the story we read earlier from Numbers, chapter 11 and you'll see what I mean. Now, this story isn't about sex. But it is a story of unchecked desire. So, I want to talk about three truths about our desires.

Here's the first. *Our desires are shaped by our environment.* This story is set during Israel's exodus from Egypt. God used Moses to rescue them from generations of brutal slavery, but now they are traveling through the wilderness and they started to get nervous because there were hundreds of thousands of them and the land they were traveling through wasn't exactly fertile. When they cried out to God, he responded by miraculously providing manna for them to eat every day.

We pick up the story in verse 4. It says, **“The rabble with them began to crave other food...”** Now, maybe you didn’t know this but the Israelites weren’t the only ones who left Egypt. There were others who wanted to travel the world or maybe someone in their family married an Israelite, or most likely they experienced the ten plagues and said, *“I’m going with them.”* They didn’t have a purpose other than to save their own skin.

In any case, God provided, but it wasn’t enough for the rabble. They wanted more, so they started to grumble. And the Israelites listened to this and were like, *“You know, now that I think about it, I’m getting pretty tired of this manna, too.”* And rather than accepting what the Lord provided as good, they wanted more.

This is a good example of how *our desires are shaped by our environment*. Now, sometimes our culture *creates* desires. For instance, I doubt that anyone in the 1500’s had a desire for an iPhone. Teenagers in the middle ages didn’t start crying when they opened their Christmas presents and they didn’t get an iPhone. But today, it happens all the time because our society created a product and then shaped our desire for it.

Sometimes our society doesn’t create desires, *but it changes our expectations for desires that are already there*. The rabble didn’t create the desire for food, but through suggestions, they changed the expectations of what kind of food they would get.

Hugh Hefner, didn’t create sexual desire. He didn’t even invent pornography. The first camera was invented in 1839 and the word “pornography” was in the dictionary by 1850. He didn’t invent pornography, but he took a lifestyle once seen as vile and

degenerate, wrapped it in a package of sophistication and made it mainstream to the point where those who opposed the Playboy life were the degenerates.

We used to believe that to live a good life, we needed to rein in our desires, but Hef's Gospel changed that to the point where most people believe that in order to live our best life we need to be free to live out our desires. And the truth is that even many Christian's sexual ethic has been more shaped by Hugh Hefner than it has by Scripture. The rabble has convinced us that what God provided isn't good enough.

The second thing we see is that *our desires cloud our thinking*. Now, we can kind of understand why Israel would complain. For instance, if all you eat through college is Ramen noodles, most likely when you can afford something different, you will. But what's harder to understand is how their desire for meat seemed to erase their memory.

Verse 5, **"We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"** Do you see how strange this is? Let me translate for you.

"Hey, guys! Remember the good old days back when we were in Egypt? Yeah. Those were good times. Remember Free Fish Fridays? And the cucumbers were amazing! They made 400 years of slavery totally worth it! I sure wish we could go back." Free fish? Of course, they got free fish. If they didn't eat, the Egyptians couldn't work them like dogs! They were fixated on something and it clouded their judgment.

You've probably had a friend who wanted so badly to get married, she got involved with someone who was terrible for her and treated her badly. Or a husband who rationalizes his affair because his wife isn't as sexually available as he thinks she should be. At the heart of every sin is to rationalize why it's not so bad, why the rules don't apply to me; why I deserve to indulge myself. This is why people continue to do things that everyone else around them can see is destructive. Our desires cloud our thinking.

Third, our desires always want more, not less. Desires are subject to the tolerance effect. We want more, but when we get it, it still doesn't satisfy. We need more and more to satiate the desire. This is what ends up as the downfall of the grumblers.

In the story, the people had complained to Moses so much and became so unbearable that he was beside himself and he becomes the drama king. *"God, why did you load me up with such a heavy burden? These aren't my children! They're YOUR children! If this is how it's going to be, then just kill me now before they kill me!"*

So, God responds. Now, God isn't happy because the people forgot the fact that they were seeing a miracle every single day. They wanted more. You see, God didn't just consider it a rejection of manna, they were rejecting him. So, God decides to bring judgment on them. But how does he do it? *By giving them what they want.*

Vs. 18, **¹⁸Tell the people: 'Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow, when you will eat meat. The Lord heard you when you wailed, "If only we had meat to eat! We were better off in Egypt!" Now the Lord will give you meat, and you will eat it.**

¹⁹You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, ²⁰but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it—because you have rejected the Lord, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?”

Now, usually, we think of God’s judgment as hellfire raining down from heaven. But in Scripture, God’s judgment is often handed out through natural events. For instance, the Old Testament prophets often warn the kings of Israel not to make treaties with the dominant Empires of the day. They say, “Don’t do it because they’ll enslave you and then they’ll turn on you.” Don’t trust them, trust God to protect you.

But when the kings don’t listen to the prophets, God doesn’t smite them with a hailstorm of asteroids. He takes his hand off them and gives them what they want. And inevitably, the Egyptians or the Babylonians do exactly what the prophets warned. When you understand that the nature of desire is to want more than you can see how this is a fitting judgment.

Here’s what happened. God sent so many quail, the people gathered it all up and gorged themselves on quail that they got sick and many of them died. Now, many commentators agree with the idea that the plague or disease came from the quail themselves and they try to determine what the “plague” or illness or disease was. I read anything from food poisoning to some type of bacterial infection to the fact that they hadn’t eaten meat in a long time and that caused them to be sick. Whatever it was, verse

34 implies that it was their gluttony that killed them. Could it be that in providing manna instead of meat, God might have been protecting them from themselves all along?

Well, I think this story provides some interesting parallels to the Gospel According to Hugh Hefner. There are all kinds of ways our elevation of desire is making us sick.

Start with overconsumption that threatens our planet. There was a story just this week that over a million species are currently close to extinction by human activity. We can't seem to control ourselves.

The CDC tells us that almost 40% of Americans are considered obese. The health issues associated with this cost us more than \$150 billion a year and increasing deaths from heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, and diabetes.

While the life expectancy of most of the world continues climb, the life expectancy in the U.S. has been dropping the last three years, due in large measure to drug overdoses and suicides.

But there might be no area where we've been less able to get a handle on our desires than when it comes to sex. Of course, that's never been an easy task, but Hugh Hefner's gospel has made it even tougher because it has dismantled the social structures God has given us to restrain and channel sexual desire into healthy outlets.

While some people consider the Gospel According to Hugh Hefner liberation, we pay a huge price for it. Let me mention just three outcomes.

First, *it keeps men in a perpetual state of boyhood*. The transition from boyhood to manhood is *responsibility*. Boys are taken care of by their parents. Men take care of themselves and their family. Boys are primarily concerned about play. They want to be with friends, have fun playing with toys or video games. But studies show that the age where boys become independent keeps creeping up higher each year.

But maybe this shouldn't be a surprise. Think about the name "Play-boy." Today, a growing number of males get older, but *never* become men—their toys just change. Instead of toy trucks, it's real trucks. And girls cease to be playmates and instead become "Playmates" [playmate logo]—sometimes in person, most often on a computer screen.

Pornography addiction is an epidemic—changing the way boys and men think about sex, diminishing their ability to maintain healthy relationships with the opposite sex, and shrinking the pool of marriageable men. Being a man no longer means taking responsibility and pursuing virtue, but pursuing ease, comfort and pleasure.

Second, *it turns women into commodities*. The Playboy life is a great deal for guys, but less so for women. After his death, Jill Filipovic—a feminist writer for the New York Times wrote this, "*Brilliantly, Hefner attached himself to the sexual revolution and the feminist gains that precipitated it. From his vantage point, publishing a magazine full of naked women was just one part of the new culture of "free love." Except of course the promise of freedom in love was less free for women...*"

He touted himself as a champion of women's rights, but Playboy always seemed to be an easy excuse for him to indulge in his fantasies regardless of whether they were also the fantasies of the women he was with. His championing of abortion rights always seemed like a transparent attempt to make it OK to have all the sex, but never take on responsibility for a child that might result. The good life he espoused treated women as objects to be consumed. And all of it under the guise of female empowerment.

In an interview for Vanity Fair, John Heilpern to Hefner, "*But feminists still oppose you for treating women as objects,*" His response was: "They *are* objects!" And treating women as objects made him a whole lot of money. For men who buy into the Playboy lifestyle, women are commodities to be consumed.

Third, *it leaves women vulnerable to the male sex drive.* Now this is a controversial point in some circles. You see, the sexual revolution has tried to convince people that men and women that women have just as strong a sexual drive as men. Well, the most recent research has effectively ended that debate. Like it or not, women are and have always been the sexual gatekeepers.

Current research also shows is that women's sexual desire is are much more influenced by their environment. This means women can be convinced to have sex even if they're not really feeling it. Men almost never need to be convinced to have sex.

Here's why this is important. Even though it was often done in an unhealthy way, society used to be an ally because the assumption was always "no" until she said "yes."

Society didn't need Beyonce to tell men, if you like then you should have put a ring on it. When society assumes sex happens in marriage, there are fewer unwanted advances.

But today, in great part because of Hefner's influence, the assumption is "yes" until she says no. Women are portrayed as being always available, which makes the task of gatekeeping much more difficult and more subject to abuse. The assumed "yes" is why, when someone like Harvey Weinstein or Charlie Rose or Aziz Ansari come on to a woman, they take their "no" to be playing hard to "get." Why wouldn't they want sex? I do!

Feminists have long complained that society used to apply pressure to women, telling them what they *shouldn't* do and shaming them if they do. But today society pressures women just as strongly telling them what they *should*, and if they don't, there's something wrong with them.

The artist Nicola Lane, reflecting on the sexual revolution said, *"It was paradise for men - all these willing girls. But the problem with the willing girls was that a lot of the time they were willing not because they particularly fancied the people concerned but because they felt they ought to."*

While even traditional society wasn't always a picnic for women, Playboy and the sexual revolution hasn't been the solution, it just changed the terms. Think about it...is sex better today because of Hugh Hefner? Are women better off because of Hugh Hefner? Are men? Are marriages? Are children? Has his gospel of sexual liberation and the elevation of desire to the highest place brought about the good life he thought it

would? The necessity of the #METOO movement today—and trust me, it IS necessary—is a testament that the Gospel of Hugh Hefner hasn't liberated women or men.

So, how do we respond to the Gospel of Hugh Hefner? If this Gospel has infiltrated even the church and you've bought into it, how do you get out? If the pressures of the sexual revolution are causing you to struggle, where do you go from here?

Let me close with a few things. First, you have to trust that God knows and wants what is best for you. Like God gave the Israelites manna to meet their needs, God created sex and it was good. But as we've seen, it's also powerful. That's why he graciously provided guardrails to keep on the right path—a man and a woman in a covenant of marriage. Sex is for us to enjoy, but its purpose isn't just personal fulfillment or recreation.

Psalm 34:8-14 says this, **“⁸Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him. ⁹Fear the Lord, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing. ¹⁰The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. ¹¹Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.**

¹²Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, ¹³keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies. ¹⁴Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.” Taste and see if God's way is better.

Second, acknowledge your desires and share your struggles. **“⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”** (1 John 1:7-8) What does it mean to walk in the light?

Well, in once sense, it means to walk rightly—to walk according to God’s Word. But it also means to walk without anything to hide.

And John says there are two results from this. First, we have *fellowship with one another*. Now, usually we think the opposite will be the case—that if we share our struggles and temptations with another believer, they’ll reject us. But I’ve always found just the opposite to be the case. Whenever I’ve opened up about a sin or struggle, I almost always found someone who said, “Me too!”

The second result is we receive God’s forgiveness. For some reason, sexual sin is especially good at producing shame. It’s a vicious cycle. That’s why it’s so important for us to hear the words—or to speak the words to a brother or sister, “God forgives you!” It’s life-giving.

And finally, *don’t resist sin by focusing on your desires*. Trying to resist sexual temptation by focusing on your desires is like dieting by thinking about food all the time. No, you need something better to capture your heart; something, or someone that loves eternally and satisfies eternally. As the Psalmist writes, **“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” (Psalm 119:11)**