

# Here's the Skinny on Fat Tuesday

By Daryl Wingerd

*Fat Tuesday* is another name for *Mardis Gras*, the raucous annual parade and party held in the streets of New Orleans, Louisiana. The tradition is many centuries old and was originally known as *Carnival*. It is held in various places around the world under different names. *Mardis Gras* (or *Fat Tuesday*) is the American version.

*Carnival* comes from a combination of Latin words meaning “farewell to the flesh.” There is a great deal of irony in that name because *Fat Tuesday* is by no means a time when the desires of the flesh are denied or bid farewell. Instead they are lavishly indulged. Anything goes—gluttonous eating, massive consumption of alcohol, even public displays of sexual immorality (to say nothing of what goes on behind closed doors). The streets, sidewalks, shops, and hotels on Bourbon Street in New Orleans are indeed X-rated during this festival of debauchery.



So why the name “farewell to the flesh”? Why not name it for what it really is? *Fat Tuesday* is known as the farewell to the flesh because *Fat Tuesday* precedes *Ash Wednesday*, the first day of *Lent*. *Lent* is a 40-day period of self-denial and repentance, instituted by some in the early church as a way of preparing Christians for *Easter*.

Those who are sinfully self-indulgent during *Mardis Gras* in preparation for the self-denial during *Lent* may be likened to a camel preparing to cross a long stretch of waterless desert. The camel drinks deeply of that which will satisfy its thirst, not only for the moment, but also for the next days and weeks. Likewise, *Fat Tuesday* revelers drink deeply of that for which they truly thirst—the lusts of the flesh—in preparation for lean times when sinful behavior will not be as socially acceptable.

The real tragedy of *Fat Tuesday* is the way “the church” has historically responded to it. *Fat Tuesday* has also been called *Shrove Tuesday*. The word “shrove” is derived from the Latin *scribere*, meaning, “to prescribe penance.” During the middle ages, religious leaders would ensure that “shriveners” (priests) were available to hear the confessions of the multitudes of presumptuous sinners who had committed all types of iniquity during *Carnival*.

The job of the priest was not to call these people to a deep and true repentance, but rather to prepare them ceremonially for *Lent*. In other words: Have your fun! Drink as deeply as you need of the lusts of the flesh! Just be

sure to confess your sins to the priest before *Lent*. The priest who hears your confession will prescribe fasting and the right sort of penance (self-inflicted penalty) for you to make amends with God.

This was (and still is) the view of many within the Roman Catholic system regarding presumptuous sin, confession, and penance. But what is the true Christian view of a day like *Fat Tuesday*?

The Apostle Paul tells us as Christians that “we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest of mankind” (Ephesians 2:3). But notice the past tense in Paul’s reminder—“we all *once lived* in the passions of our flesh.” In another place, describing the *current* mindset of a true Christian, Paul asks, “How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:2). To the Corinthians Paul wrote about the way they were *before* becoming Christians, saying,

Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

True Christians are not perfect. They can and do sin. But they no longer *thirst* after sin. Sin is no longer where they find satisfaction. A true believer would never consider intentionally storing up the pleasures of sinful indulgence on *Fat Tuesday* in order to prepare for a “drought” of religiously imposed self-righteousness—fasting and penance during *Lent*. True Christians always “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matthew 5:6), “hating even the garment stained by the flesh” (Jude 23).

The one who says he knows Christ yet thirsts after and willfully engages in sin, whether daily in private or annually in the great public orgy known as *Fat Tuesday*, “is a liar and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4). And the priest or religious leader who affirms a person in such behavior by assuring him that external acts of confession and penance will make him right with God, is participating in one of the devil’s most clever schemes.

The Christian who *really is* a Christian prays to God from the heart,

Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins;  
Let them not have dominion over me (Psalm 19:13).

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