

Religious but Lost, To Saved by God's Grace at 71

Richard Cortez | illbehonest.com

Richard is 81 years old. He was saved from a false profession 9 years ago when he was 72.

I am Richard Cortez, I am 81 years old by God's wonderful and amazing grace. And the amazing thing is that He has not only given me 81 years of life but has sustained me in good health, physical, mental and hopefully growing in spirit and in truth and in knowledge and in the love of Christ.

And I have to say at this point with all sincerity and reverence that I have been crucified with Christ it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me. I have to say and admit that I am a sinner saved by grace.

I lived a long time many years in the church. In fact, I remember from the very beginning, as a young child sleeping on the floor in front of my parents in a large Assemblies of God church where there was stomping and yelling and praising. And my Aunt Lolita pounding on the piano. Foreign languages being spoken and I put myself to sleep on Sunday nights. And it seemed like an endless thing. People would not go home. It was just continuous. And this is the way I would put myself to sleep. And this where my parents were married and this was my roots.

But after a while we moved around. I was born in 1927, during the depression years. Possibly because of the finances we moved around quite a bit throughout the city. But my dad was always insistent that we go to church no matter where we moved. We attended several churches and sometimes they were close to the home and sometimes not, but my dad was very conscious that it was important to attend church. So I grew up being an attendant of church, and as we grew up it was part of my life, going to church. And I considered it very important it was a habit and a tradition that my dad started us out with. And I appreciated that very much.

Later on, after I got out of the Navy I went to college and got an education. It was during these years that we belonged to a Methodist church. I grew up in this Methodist Church and attended all the activities, sang in the choir, and even led the youth choir. I felt good about myself. I told myself that I was "serving the Lord." I was conscious of what my father had taught me and I was involved in all the activities canvassing from house to house and going on missionary trips and going to summer camps. It was fun and the fellowship was good and I knew I was doing something worthwhile. Church was something that was valuable to me.

A couple of years later a young evangelist came into town and had a revival. My wife and I both walked down the aisle. We responded to the call, we signed the sheet, and we were both baptized. This happened back in the early 60's. As I look back there wasn't much change in my life. The only difference that I noticed was that I had gone in dry and came out wet. But that was the only difference in my life.

And so I kept going on to church. It was my custom and it was my habit and I did not consider sin or salvation or repentance. I was too busy in my school work, and church work, and

leading the band. And I didn't even think of sin or salvation or repentance or anything like that. I felt I was too busy for these things and I went ahead and did my thing in church.

Six years later, I found myself on an airplane to Hawaii. And to me it was paradise - the air, the breezes, the palm trees, the ocean. It was truly a life of joy and I was thoroughly happy there. In fact, I had decided I would stay there forever. But this idolatrous attitude was not part of God's will because after a short while, well after several years, my marriage started taking a tumble. We started having problems, struggles, and arguments for any little thing. And I was getting desperate and I was miserable and here I was on the island of paradise but yet I was miserable. I could not understand why so one thing led to another.

In the early 1970's and about 1972 we ended up back in San Antonio, this was very regrettable to my plans. My wife was sick. I was without a job. And I had an anxiety attack and I thought I was going to die and I was just miserable. I didn't have a job in California, Hawaii, or anywhere. But I have to admit that even when I was young, before I got married - in fact, I didn't get married until the age of 32. And I have to admit that during those years, I lived to satisfy the flesh. I have to admit it now. I had a good job, had a good education, and I felt that I had accomplished much. And I thought much about myself and no one was complaining. I wasn't thinking about sin or or repentance or anything like that. Where I went to church I wasn't any different from any of my friends or relatives, so I felt comfortable.

But when I look back now I realize that I was self-righteous, I was self-centered, and self-sufficient, not depending on God and just seeking to satisfy my flesh. My children had already grown. They were young adults and by God's amazing grace they had been saved, all 3. Rick, Mayra and Ruby. And they used to come and preach to me and tell me, "Dad, you're not learning the truth." "You need to learn the truth." And in fact, Rick, he came down on me and my wife real hard. He had a lot of zeal and he pounded it. "Mom, dad, you're living in sin. You need to repent or you're going to go to Hell."

And I thought to myself, "Who does this kid think he is telling me what to do? I've been in church all my life and I'm a deacon in this church. I'm part of the Southern Baptist Convention, a large organization world wide and well known. And how could so many people be wrong?" I said to myself. In fact, it occurred to me that Rick joined a cult that was meeting out in the country in Elmendorf somewhere and that's what occurred to me. In fact, I started inquiring about this church. But I didn't know at the time that he knew the truth and I was proud and I wasn't about to admit that I was wrong. I would argue that "How could so many people be wrong?" And argue that God had given us a brain, He's given us a mind to use as we please.

And my biggest error, when I look back, is that I had been to church for so many years and my concentration was on the church. And of course now I know that the church does not save you. I had been living with secret sins and then I think how could I be so naive? So ignorant to think that a supreme sovereign God Who knows all and Who's is omnipotent and omnipresent. That I could hide any secrets from Him.

And I wonder how many people live like this with secret sins that no one sees and no one knows about. And you feel that you're okay because no one sees you. But this is dangerous because we're not accountable to any one, we're depending on our own selves on our own will and and our own desires and this was a large error on my part. And I have to admit that I was living in "secret sin." Sins that no one could see. Sins that were invisible.

And I thought that probably the greatest sin that I committed was in Shanghai, China, when I was in the Navy years back. But I came to realize that there's no great sin or small sin, a sin is a sin, whether you steal 100 dollars or a paperclip, it's a sin and it's an abomination to the Lord. And I had to realize this and here I'd been to church for years and years. For many years. Not 60. Not 70. Not 75. But 80 years.

Gradually and slowly I began to grow in knowledge and in truth and the Lord started working in my life and it was during these years that I was exposed to much preaching on the truth and reading and studying Romans. And I came to the point where the Apostle Paul says "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." And I said to myself, "Well, that's me." And I had never thought of it this way. And He also says, "There is none righteous no not one. No one seeks after God." There is not one that's righteous.

And I thought about the verses and I was convicted. And the Lord was revealing himself to me and I felt that the Lord had saved me from condemnation, from the evil world from my bad thoughts, and cleansed me completely. Inward and outward I felt clean and I had a relationship with Christ which I had never had before. For so many years, I had heard of Christ I read of Christ. I sang, "Jesus loves me; this I know." And all these things about Jesus Christ. But I did not identify with Him as my Savior Who had died an agonizing death on the cross and felt the crushing blow of the wrath of God on Him for my sake. He took my place, He was a substitute for my sins. And I did not have this relationship until now.

So I felt free and I felt clean. I'd been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb and I felt a new life, a new attitude, a new heart and I was so thankful because for so many years I did not really know Christ, I only knew of Him. But I did not have this close relationship with Him.

So as I think back, for so many years going to church, and I felt good about myself I felt proud and yet I was living in sin.

(In March of 2000, Richard was converted and saved by God's grace at Free Grace Baptist Church.)

But I thank God that He has forgiven me. It is by God's grace that I have been cleansed and I have the assurance that there is therefore now no condemnation to those that are in Christ who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Sins do not have dominion over me anymore. (Romans 6:14) This is a great assurance, I am so thankful, I praise the Lord.

I just pray for those that are going to church, those that are reaching their older years and are continuing to go to church because they feel obligated because of friends and other reasons. But there's never been a change. The only change has maybe been the carpet or the church or the asphalt on the parking lot, but there's no change in the heart, no change in their lives. And they don't want to move because they're comfortable in their comfort zone. I was there for a long time and my suggestion is to encourage you to think and pray: is the Lord God the Creator of heaven and earth that sent His Son to die for our sins? Is he being preached here? Or are you hearing nothing but health, wealth, and prosperity? That you're good, that you're number 1 and you deserve this, and you deserve that?

This is not Christ. And my encouragement is that those that are in this position, believing that church is enough, it's not enough. The church does not save, the pastor does not save, the priest does not save, it is only those with an intimate and personal relationship with the Lord. I want to praise the Lord and thank Him. I know that I am near the end of my race and I am

prepared, I have peace in my heart and if the Lord were to take me I can say like the apostle Paul, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21). I would rejoice and I would go happily. I've lived a life for Christ and my children are serving Him and I have joy in my heart and to be face to face with Christ in glory where I can live for eternity. What a joy! What an expectation! I would go rejoicing victoriously to meet my Savior in eternal life.