

The day I revealed to the other moms that I'm a bad Christian

## **Of all the things I could have gone donkey nuts over, it was "quiet time" that pushed me over the edge.**

by [Jamie Wright](#) in the [April 11, 2018](#) issue



The first time I walked into a church, I might as well have had a red bull's-eye painted directly over my heart. You couldn't have picked a more perfect walking target for somebody's next "intentional relationship." I was scared and sad and deeply wounded, and I was looking for someone to tell me that life would be okay.

One Sunday morning when my husband, Steve, wasn't home, I made my way to the church closest to our house, nervously checked my little boy into the kids' program, and sat alone in the very last row, as near to the exit as I could possibly get. I was there not out of curiosity or even genuine interest but out of sheer desperation.

Growing up, I'd heard over and over again that Christians are losers who don't know how to live their own lives. I was told Christians are pathetic dummies who need a

crutch to lean on because they can't stand on their own two feet. I was taught to see Jesus as a leader for people who couldn't think for themselves and needed to be told what to do. So as a confused 19-year-old with a child I didn't know how to raise, a husband I didn't know how to love, and a life I had no idea how to live, it seemed like maybe I should meet this Jesus, the God of pitiful weaklings who are limping along without a clue.

Turns out they were right. Jesus was exactly who I needed.

Much to my surprise, I found a sense of belonging in church and unexpected joy in the pursuit of faith. In those early days I was like a rescue puppy: precious and needy, dying for love and affection, begging for reassurance. I was ready and willing to be trained by the first family who would take me home, and that family was the church. I lapped up their attention, and they were kind and gentle and gracious, teaching me the rules and showing me how to behave, and for a while I was content to simply perform.

Sit. Stay. *Good Christian*.

In the beginning it was simple. It was easy. It was pleasant and rewarding. It was following the rules and obeying the laws and asking only rhetorical questions. It was just believe in your heart. Just pray. Just forgive. Just show up. It was "because the Bible says." (And the Bible? It was clear.) It was a country club. It was a soul spa. It was a light show. It was come as you are . . . *as long as you are approved*. And in the beginning, *I was*. I wore the uniform and I spoke the language and I followed all of the rules.

Until I didn't.

Actually, my years in "good Christian" standing were relatively short-lived. It simply wasn't in my nature to conform as heartily and completely to the ways of the church ladies as was required to stay aboveboard in their circles. I can still clearly recall the first time I got a proper "bad Christian" finger wagging.

It was at one of those meetings for tired moms to drop their sticky-faced crap factories in child care for two whole hours so we could indulge in adult conversation and sip coffee while it was still hot. I went every week, and when I walked into the room I knew without a doubt I was surrounded by my people—women with spit-up stains on their shoulders and chicken nugget chunks in their hair. Like me, they

carried saggy post- baby bellies, dark circles under their eyes, and purses littered with half-eaten granola bars, loose gummy bears, and tattered tampons. Over many months of Tuesday mornings together, we grew into a pretty close group, shouldering one another's burdens while we passed our tightly wrapped newborns around like joints.

We laughed and cried, talked and prayed. We shared good recipes and bad weight-loss advice, and we never lacked for butter or carbs or caffeine, because someone always showed up with a pile of muffins and the coffee flowed freely. It was the land of breast milk and honey, a small break from the daily grind of laundry and diapers and little runny noses.

Generous and well intentioned, that group of women taught me what it looks like to serve, as I often found myself overwhelmed by the energy of three little boys, and they showed up, again and again, to help in my hour of need. Truly, I probably would not have survived the early years of parenting without the friendship and support of the church ladies, and for that I will always be grateful.

But in the end, my experience with their particular brand of faith tipped the scales of the comfortable Christian life against me. Of all the things I could have gone donkey nuts over, and there were many, it was "quiet time" that pushed me over the edge.

In the book we were studying together, we'd read about how quiet time was crucial to our spiritual lives, which set off a group lamentation about the overall lack of high-quality quiet time. If you're unfamiliar with the concept of quiet time, it's kind of a sacred cow in ladies' church circles. Originating from the ancient discipline of intentionally making space each day to commune with God, today quiet time is a spiritual practice most often observed on social media: #quiettime pics usually include a lit candle sitting next to a cup of coffee with visible steam, or maybe a latte with foam art, and an open Bible, preferably out of focus. (It's called "quiet time" because "candle and coffee time" sounds stupid and "prayer time" was apparently already taken.)

Mothers of young children are famous for trying to fit quiet time in during nap time, which also happens to be laundry time, dishes time, shower time, and stare-off-into-space-in-stunned-silence time. From a teething baby to a buzzing dryer to falling asleep at the table with her eyes open, more often than not, quiet time is a total bust for Mama Bear. So it was no surprise when everyone in the group sadly agreed

that a daily quiet time seemed like an impossible luxury.

The book, of course, offered a solution for our quiet-time dilemmas. It said, “Get up earlier.”

Yup. All you have to do is get up and have your quiet time in the dark before anyone else in the entire world is awake, because “you can sleep when you’re dead.”

It said that. For real. Like, it actually said, “You can sleep when you are dead.” I’m not kidding. A bunch of baby-brained, undernourished, zombie moms were being told that what they really needed to make their lives better was *less sleep*.

God is with us in the chaos, noise, and silliness.

For the record, I’m not anti-quiet time. I actually think it’s a healthy part of any spiritual life, and I try to make a habit of it now that my kids are pretty much all grown up and out of the way. But this happened when my babies were still babies. And I don’t know if you know this, but living with small children is a lot like swimming with piranhas—they may not swoop in and kill you outright, but the nipping and nibbling are relentless.

Sleep was the one thing I knew I had to have if I was gonna be a decent mom for another day. I needed sleep, because my kids needed me to get dressed and go to the park and read the same book 400 times and kiss boo-boos and settle disputes over Legos and cut a single grape into 11 pieces and scoop turds out of the bathtub and not kill anybody, either by accident or on purpose.

*Sleep was life.*

I could handle interpretive differences about marriage and womanhood and mental illness that the book stirred up, but nobody was gonna tell me to sleep when I’m dead. That’s going too far.

So when the group leader made a quip about quiet time needing to be quiet, an unexpected volcano of molten outrage burst forth from the depths of my soul. And even though I still stand by what I said next, I do wish I’d said it with a little less . . . *crazy*.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, then call it ‘loud time’! Call it ‘chaos time.’ Call it what it’s supposed to be, which is ‘intentional time’! But do not tell me that God entrusted

three kids to my care and protection—knowing full well what a total energy suck they are—with the expectation that I would keep them all alive and, oh, *also*, get up before the ass crack of dawn to ‘be quiet with him,’ because ‘I can sleep when I’m dead.’”

I was using finger quotes, and I wasn’t finished.

In my memory, this impromptu speech is impassioned and articulate, though it’s highly unlikely that was actually the case. If only in my head, what I went on to say came out something like this: “I don’t think that’s how it works. I really don’t. I think God is *with us*. Like, day in and day out, in the chaos and the noise and the silliness of life, *he is there*. The God of your precious, untouchable ‘quiet time’ is a present witness to our nonstop lives, never absent for the clamor of our kids’ laughter, their squeals, their skinned knees, their fussing and whining and raging fits in the Target parking lot. God is not withholding himself from us, waiting for us to come to him in the wee hours of the morning as a measure of our devotion!”

“I mean, if you have the bandwidth to get up an hour earlier every day, with your twelve-dollar scented candle and your fancy French press, good for you! You should totally do that! But don’t you dare act like it’s some kind of deal breaker for the rest of us. Don’t. You. Dare.”

“I will *not* be getting up earlier. Nope. I’m gonna honor God intentionally *in my sleep*, because I’m pretty sure God wants me to be the very best mother I can possibly be to my boys. I will listen for God’s voice in the wilderness, and at the water park, and under McDonald’s indoor play structure, because that is my daily *loud time* and God is faithful to meet me in the chaos. If that makes me a bad Christian, *then I guess I’m a bad Christian*. But tomorrow I’ll be sleeping in. And I’m not even gonna worry about it, because I’m pretty sure *I’LL HAVE PLENTY OF QUIET TIME WITH GOD WHEN I’M DEAD!*”

There was no mic drop, no standing ovation, no vigorous applause from my fellow wrung-out baby wranglers. What followed was several long seconds of intensely awkward silence, punctuated by a snuffle on one side of the room and a cleared throat on the other, until someone had the presence of mind to slide the entire tray of muffins to the center of the table. To my great relief, and by the healing touch of simple carbs, life and casual conversation resumed. It was not a rousing victory speech, but still, I did win a battle that day; I expressed a strong difference of

opinion in front of the Church Ladies Who Know All Things . . . *and I lived*. In that moment, I began to get comfortable in my own skin as a Pretty Bad Christian.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “My life as a bad Christian.” It was adapted from [The Very Worst Missionary: A Memoir or Whatever](#), copyright © 2018 by Jamie L. Wright, published this month by Convergent Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC.*

