

Sean McDowell

# Think Biblically

Addressing Cultural Issues  
with **Clarity** and **Boldness**

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# Contents

<b>About the Author</b>	04
<b>Guide</b>	06
<b>A Note From the Author</b>	07
<b>Session 1: How to Take a Stand</b>	08
<b>Session 2: Relationships</b>	22
<b>Session 3: Sex</b>	36
<b>Session 4: Care</b>	50
<b>Session 5: Culture</b>	64
<b>Session 6: How to Love Your Neighbor</b>	78
<b>Tips for Leading a Group</b>	93
<b>Leader Guide</b>	94

# About the Author



**DR. SEAN MCDOWELL** is a gifted communicator with a passion for equipping the church, and in particular young people, to make the case for the Christian faith. He connects with audiences in a tangible way through humor and stories while imparting hard evidence and logical support for viewing all areas of life through a Biblical worldview. Sean is an Associate Professor in the Christian Apologetics program at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University.

Sean also teaches a high school Bible class, which helps give him exceptional insight into the prevailing culture so he can impart his

observations poignantly to fellow educators, pastors, and parents alike. In 2008 he received the Educator of the Year award for San Juan Capistrano, California. The Association of Christian Schools International awarded Exemplary Status to his apologetics training. Sean is listed among the top 100 apologists. He graduated summa cum laude from Talbot Theological Seminary with a double master's degree in Theology and Philosophy. He earned a Ph.D. in Apologetics and Worldview Studies from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 2014.

Traveling throughout the United States and abroad, Sean speaks at camps, churches, schools, universities, and conferences. He has spoken for organizations including Focus on the Family, the Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview, Cru, Youth Specialties, Hume Lake Christian Camps, Fellowship of Christian Athletes and the Association of Christian Schools International. Sean is the co-host for the Think Biblically podcast, which is one of the most popular podcasts on faith and cultural engagement. Sean's YouTube channel (Dr. Sean McDowell) is one of the top apologetics channels.

Sean is the author, co-author, or editor of over twenty books including *Chasing Love*, *The Fate of the Apostles*, *So The Next Generation Will Know* (with J. Warner Wallace), *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (with Josh McDowell), *Same-Sex Marriage: A Thoughtful Approach to God's Design for Marriage* (with John Stonestreet), *Is God Just a Human Invention?* (with Jonathan Morrow) and *Understanding Intelligent Design* (with William A. Dembski). Sean is the General Editor for *A New Kind of Apologist*, *Apologetics for a New Generation*, *Sharing the Good News with Mormons*, and *The Apologetics Study Bible for Students*. Sean has one of the leading apologetics blogs, which can be read at [seanmcdowell.org](http://seanmcdowell.org).

In April 2000, Sean married his high school sweetheart, Stephanie. They have three children and live in San Juan Capistrano, California. Sean played college basketball at Biola University and was the captain his senior year on a team that went 30-7.

**This Bible study book includes six weeks of content. Each week has video teaching, followed by content designed for groups and individuals.**

## **GROUP DISCUSSION**

Begin each week with the group discussion. This section uses the following format to facilitate simple yet meaningful interaction among group members, with God's Word and with the video teaching.

### **WATCH**

Video content can be found at [lifeway.com/thinkbiblically](http://lifeway.com/thinkbiblically). Each video is 6-8 minutes long and designed to help students think about the topics for the week and engage in discussion. There is a guide that includes key points from the video teaching with blanks for students to fill in as they watch the video.

### **DISCUSS**

These pages include questions and statements that guide students to respond to the video teaching and to relevant Bible passages. Since this study covers difficult topics, it's important to consider the age, maturity level, and needs of your group. Consult with church leadership and parents about any controversial questions that may be covered during group time.

## **PERSONAL STUDY**

Four days of personal study are provided each week to take students deeper into Scripture and to supplement the biblical truths introduced in the group discussion and teaching time. These pages challenge students to grow in their understanding of God's Word and to make practical applications to their lives.

## **LEADER GUIDE**

At the back of the book is a leader guide to help you walk students through these challenging topics. There you will find an icebreaker, discussion tips, and a prayer guide to go along with the discussion guide found in each session.



## A Note From the Author

We live in one of the most divided times in American history. How can Christians stand up for truth and justice, and yet do it in a loving, God-honoring way? This is exactly the question we are going to explore in this study.

Despite what many people think, there is a way to have civil, meaningful conversations with people about issues that matter. The key is being thoughtful about our own beliefs and learning some tools for engaging others. This study will help you do both.

This study will also help you explore biblical principles for how to think about some of the most controversial issues of our day. Obviously, what you'll find here is not exhaustive, but it will give you a great place to begin to think biblically about these important topics. You will also be equipped with some ideas for how to put the knowledge you gain into action, so you can have a positive influence on others for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Let's go!

*Sean*



Session 1

# How To Take a Stand



## WATCH

Use the fill-in-the-blanks and note-taking space as you watch the Session 1 teaching video together as a group.

Sean says he wants to motivate you to be like this through this study:

Someone with \_\_\_\_\_, willing to do the right thing, \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ may be.

**Read Daniel 1:8a (CSB).**

*“Daniel determined that he would not defile himself with the king’s food ...”*

**A reason you might get defensive:**

Maybe you \_\_\_\_\_ what you believe and why you believe it.

**Response to Sean from atheist:**

“I’m \_\_\_\_\_ they’ll treat me like they just treated you.”

**The two goals of this study are:**

Goal 1: Think biblically about \_\_\_\_\_.

Goal 2: Be motivated by \_\_\_\_\_.

**Read John 13:35 (CSB).**

*“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

Teaching videos are available at [lifeway.com/thinkbiblically](http://lifeway.com/thinkbiblically)

# GROUP DISCUSSION

*Jessica never imagined she would be facing the decision that was before her today. Growing up in church, she had learned much about making right choices in the areas of sex, love, and relationships, but this was beyond anything she had been tested with before. "How can I possibly do the right thing," she wondered, "when my college psychology professor has assigned me to review a porn film as part of my grade?" Without this assignment Jessica's grade would suffer greatly, but she also knew that God wanted her to be sexually pure.*

**What could she do in this situation?**

**What would you do?**

*Jaelene faced one of the toughest decisions of her life. Would she wear a U.S. national soccer team jersey sporting rainbow numbers to celebrate gay pride? Or should she decline, and jeopardize her position on the team? You might not think this is such a big deal. After all, it's just a jersey, right? Because of her Christian faith, and her convictions about God's design for sex and marriage, it was a big deal for Jaelene. Choosing not to wear the jersey might cost her a spot on the team?*

**What should she do?**

**What would you do?**

These are both true stories and scenarios young people who are followers of Jesus, like yourself, have faced. They are not easy situations to be in. Can you imagine the pressure they'd feel to compromise their Christian convictions? After all, both worked hard for their success. Jessica and Jaelene want to excel in life and they also want to honor the Lord. Is there a way to do both? Should they really be expected to suffer for doing the right thing? Doesn't God want them to be happy?

Every day you face moral choices: Will I respect my parents? Should I post that on social media? How far should I go with my boyfriend or girlfriend? Will I use

the preferred gender pronoun for a classmate? Should I join a protest for climate change, racial reconciliation, immigration, or some other pressing issue?

### **What are the issues that concern you the most, and why?**

The question is not if you will face challenging situations like Jessica or Jaelene, but when will you face them. How you respond to moral dilemmas reflects who you are right now and, in turn, shapes who you become. This is all the more important for those who want to follow Jesus. Since He calls His people to live in a different way than the world around us, that means a lot of the thinking and acting the world calls moral is not only unhelpful, but often harmful. The purpose of this study is to equip you to think through some of today's most pressing ethical issues so you can be a faithful follower of Jesus.

Even though you are a young Christian, I believe God can use you right now to make a difference.

### **Do you really believe this? Why or why not?**

You may feel so overwhelmed with your responsibilities and the number of moral issues you are expected to have an opinion about, that you feel like you hardly have time to slow down and grow up. Bombarded by endless worldly messages of compromise, who can honestly expect you to make right choices today?

The answer to that question is simple: God does. God expects you to make right choices. God's standards never change—even if ours do. God not only expects you to stand up for what is right, He will empower you with the strength to do so. How can you possibly do that today? Let's start by looking back at the story of Daniel, a young man who stood boldly for what was right in his day.

**Give students a few minutes to read Daniel 1.**

Daniel was an exile from Jerusalem, forced to live in Babylon, after his people were conquered. He could interpret dreams, he survived a night in a lion's den, and he faced many tough decisions.

In Daniel 1:3-4, King Nebuchadnezzar assigned Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to select smart, handsome, and noble young men from among the exiles. They were to learn the language, literature, and traditions of the Babylonians for three years so they could serve in the king's palace. There was one big problem for Daniel and his friends: In order to fulfill these duties, they had to accept the royal food and drink, which violated the law God had prescribed for His people to follow. Daniel and his friends had a tough decision: Would they seek to please the king or honor God? Daniel came up with a creative solution, which ended up honoring God and the king.

### **Read Daniel 1:8.**

***But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank.***

### **What is significant about Daniel's attitude?**

The word "resolved" is past tense. In other words, even before Daniel knew the outcome, he determined he was going to honor God. He refused to defile his body even before he knew what the outcome would be. Now that's conviction.

### **Do you have a "Daniel dilemma" in your life, in which you feel caught in a tug-of-war between God and your friends, family, or school? If so, would you mind sharing it with the group?**

Determining that you want to honor the Lord before moral challenges come is important for standing strong today. It is often too late—although not impossible—to do the right thing without developing convictions beforehand. Have you done that? Have you resolved, like Daniel, to honor God regardless of the cost?

I can't make this decision for you and neither can your parents. Only you can make it. If you do, I can't promise that your life will be easier. The apostle Peter indicated that it may be God's will for believers to suffer (1 Pet. 3:17). In the case of Jessica, things did work out well. After prayer and counsel, she proposed to her teacher that he allow

her to write a persuasive paper on why she should be excused from the assignment. He reluctantly agreed.

She wrote a four-page paper on why, as a Christian, she should not watch pornography. Can you guess what happened? Not only did he accept the paper, but he also had her present it to the entire class and allowed other students to opt out of the assignment as well. Nearly half the class followed her lead. One person can make a difference.

Jaelene was not so fortunate. After three days of prayer and reflection, she chose to withdraw from the women's national team rather than wear the jersey supporting gay pride. "If I never get another national team call-up again then that's just a part of His plan, and that's okay," she said. "Maybe this is why I was meant to play soccer, to show other believers to be obedient."<sup>1</sup>

She was arguably the best fullback in the game at the time of the U.S. Women's World Cup tryout, and yet because of her convictions, she wasn't given a slot on the roster. She regularly receives jeers and boos when she plays in the National Women's Soccer League. For Jaelene, doing the right thing cost her dearly.

**What do the different outcomes of each situation teach you about the moral decisions you will make in life?**

Although different outcomes, both Jessica and Jaelene chose wisely. They both honored the Lord, like Daniel, regardless of the consequences.

Will you?

# Day 1:

## WHO ARE YOU TO JUDGE?

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Not long ago, while speaking on moral issues with a youth group, a teen girl stood up and asked: “Who are you to judge?” She clearly thought I was being hateful for claiming certain behaviors as wrong.

**How would you respond to her if she asked you the same question about a pressing moral issue?**

As best as I can remember, I simply said, “I have thought about this for a long time, weighed all sides of the issue, and think my position is the most moral, although I am open to correction if you could show where I am wrong.” She wasn’t quite sure how to respond.

My goal wasn’t to embarrass her, but to point out that as human beings and followers of Jesus, we are supposed to make informed moral judgments. We do it all the time. In fact, ironically, she was morally judging me! By asking what right I had to make a moral judgment, she was implying that I should not make such a judgment. But isn’t that a judgment? Of course!

Without realizing it, people regularly say contradictory things like this. Try to see what is wrong with the following statements:

**“You should be tolerant of views different than your own.”**

**“You should not force your morals on others.”**

**“It is arrogant to think you are right.”**

Each one of these examples make a claim that contradicts itself. Many times when someone says, “You should be tolerant of other views” what they mean is, “You should be tolerant of my views, but I don’t have to be tolerant of your views.”

Though many people may say moral claims are not grounded in absolute truth and are simply personal preference, that thought is a claim for absolute truth. Whether people acknowledge it or not, truth is hardwired into our hearts.

Consider Romans 2:14: "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves."

### **When have you seen an example of people who do not believe in God following His law?**

According to Paul, God has made all human beings with a moral conscience to recognize right and wrong. Thus, even people who do not even believe in God are still made in His image and recognize right and wrong. Even atheists can be moral because God's law is written on their hearts.

Let's go back to the idea of judgment. You might ask, "Didn't Jesus tell us not to judge?" In Matthew 7:1 (NIV), Jesus said, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." That's true, but look at the fuller context of His teaching. In verse 5, He said, "first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

### **What is the real problem Jesus was addressing?**

Jesus wasn't saying never to make moral judgments. What He was teaching against was hypocritical judgment, where we judge others with a standard we do not apply to ourselves. Before we can criticize someone else's faults, we need to examine our own first. When we've examined our own heart in view of God's Word, then we can help others come to an understanding of His truth.

## Day 2:

# HOW DO I BECOME A GOOD PERSON?

---

**Why do people have opinions on issues?**

**What factors cause someone to adopt an opinion as their own?**

People claim an opinion on something because they believe it is right. Most people take a side because they believe it is good and decent. Today more than ever, people want to be on the “right side of history.” But how do you know what is good and right and become a good person?

The choices we make are an extension of who we are. We don’t make moral choices in isolation from our character, and we don’t make good choices by accident. If we want to make right choices, we have to develop certain virtues into our lives.

How do we do this?

- 1. Repent of your sins and believe in Jesus. Becoming the kind of person God wants us to be begins by recognizing our own failed attempts at being good, so that we will repent of our sins and trust Jesus to transform us through His grace.**

**How have you seen Jesus transform you through His grace?**



2. **Saturate yourself in Scripture.** Paul said to not “be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2a). One of the most important ways to avoid conforming to this world, and to experience transformation, is to study God’s Word.

**How has God’s Word helped you transform into the person God wants you to be?**

3. **Be a person of prayer.**

**Why is prayer so important?**

Prayer is not primarily about getting things from God. It is about conforming our will to His. We pray for our enemies so we can better love them. We pray for those who persecute us so that God will change our hearts. Prayer is essential for becoming a person who is truly capable of loving his or her neighbor.

4. **Choose friends wisely.**

**How do you choose your friends?**

**How much do your friends influence you?**

There are few people in life who will have a bigger impact on you than your friends. Good friends not only keep us from trouble, they help us live wise and courageous lives. This is why it’s so important to be a member of a local church. God has designed the church as a means through which believers are disciplined, counseled, supported, and encouraged. Join a good church and get involved!

## Day 3:

# HOW DO I LOVE MY NEIGHBOR?

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At churches, conferences, and schools, I often role-play an atheist to motivate Christians to see how prepared (or unprepared) they are to engage someone who doesn't believe the same way we do. While audiences know I am really a Christian, I put on glasses to "become" an atheist character, take live questions from the audience, and then offer my best atheist responses.

After I have offered some thoughtful atheist responses, groups often get defensive. I have had people storm out of the session, yell answers across the room, and personally insult me. And they know I'm role-playing!

### **Why do you think some Christians respond this way?**

I am convinced there are two big reasons.

- 1. Many Christians don't know what they believe and why. If we don't have solid reasons for our beliefs, it is difficult to respond graciously when people challenge us.**

### **How do you respond when someone challenges what you believe?**

- 2. We forget how gracious God has been toward us. When someone is transformed by God's mercy, they will extend mercy to others. Therefore, a failure to grant mercy to others reveals we don't truly grasp the depth of God's mercy to us.**

## **How do you know you have experienced God's grace personally?**

One reason it is so challenging to love our neighbors today is that our culture operates under a different definition of love than what Jesus teaches.

## **How does our culture define love?**

Today, love means affirming someone's behavior and beliefs. It means accepting someone for who they believe themselves to be. And it means agreeing with however someone feels about themselves. If not, you're considered to be hateful.

## **How does Jesus define love?**

Love involves a willingness to sacrifice for the good of another. It is a commitment to the well-being of another person, even if he or she does not recognize or accept the reality of the good. Biblically, love involves being committed to what God says is good for someone, regardless of how they feel.

## **With this in mind, how can you better love your neighbor today?**

It is not easy to love your neighbor today. In reality, it never has been easy to follow in the steps of Jesus. But God has called you to this task. Are you up for the challenge?

## Day 4:

# WHAT IS MY WORLDVIEW?

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One of the most significant lessons my dad has taught me is about the power of assumptions. As a high school student, I remember him saying, “When you read an article or book, always discern the assumptions of the person who wrote it. Their assumptions will shape everything they write.” Although it took me some time to really grasp its significance, now I see how powerful this insight is.

Essentially, my dad was teaching me to understand the power of worldview. Simply put, a worldview is the way we see the world. It is how we perceive reality and the filter through which we see the world.

### **What are three elements that shape your worldview?**

Worldviews answer big questions like: Is there a God? Does life continue after death? What is a human being? What brings true happiness? Is there a moral law?

**Take some time to think about these questions. How does the Bible answer them? Write down your answers below and include a verse or two as evidence.**

**Is there a God?**

**Does life continue after death?**

**What is a human being?**

**Is there a moral law?**

Everyone has a worldview. They may not know what it's called, but ideas shape what people think and believe.

**HERE ARE A FEW PROMINENT WORLDVIEWS AND BRIEF EXPLANATIONS OF THEM:**

- **Naturalism is the idea that God does not exist and that everything can be explained by natural forces.**
- **Secular humanism is a naturalist worldview that states truth and goodness can be discovered apart from religion or God.**
- **Existentialism is a naturalist worldview based on the idea that humans define our own existence.**
- **Consumerism says you are what you own and promises happiness to those who have things.**
- **Hedonism considers the pursuit of pleasure the highest good.**
- **Individualism places the individual at the center of moral authority.**

Not only are each of these worldviews in conflict with the teachings of Jesus, they also profoundly shape the life choices of those who hold them.

How do you recognize worldviews? Here are a few pointers:

- **When reading a book, article, or social media post, consider a few questions: Who is the author? What is his or her expertise? Who is he or she writing to and why? What is his or her belief system? Consider the same kinds of questions when watching television or videos on social media platforms.**
- **When having a conversation, ask probing questions and be a good listener. Try to discern the underlying assumptions driving the person's moral beliefs or behavior.**

Learning to recognize underlying worldviews is an important skill for Christians who want to be able to engage people around them in meaningful conversations. Understanding our own worldview helps us think biblically.