

Session 1: The Strong Man's House

Luke 11:14-26 · 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. The group discovers what a stronghold actually is (a lie defended so long it feels like a load-bearing wall) and, more importantly, who Christ is in the fight: the Stronger One who has already broken into the strong man's house. The session ends with the fight reframed: we are not storming a fortress alone; we are joining a victory already won.

Catholic Touchstone. Christ's definitive victory over the "prince of this world" (CCC 2853) and the baptized Christian's dignity (CCC 1691). The whole of human history is caught up in a hard combat with the powers of darkness (CCC 409, citing *Gaudium et Spes* 37): the decisive engagement was won at the cross once for all, and its fruits are received, defended, and lived until he comes.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

This session opens a study for people in the middle of a real fight. Assume the room quietly contains battles with pornography, drink, rage, resentment, food, self-hatred, gossip, spending, despair. You will never ask anyone to name their battle, tonight or ever. Say that out loud in the first ten minutes; it changes what people are willing to receive.

The main text is Luke 11:14-26. Jesus has just cast out a demon that kept a man mute, and the crowd splits: some marvel, some accuse him of working by *Beelzebul*, the prince of demons. Jesus answers with iron logic (a kingdom divided against itself falls; Satan does not sabotage Satan) and then makes the claim that gives our study its name: "when one stronger than he assails him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoil" (Luke 11:22). The exorcism the crowd just watched is not a magic trick; it is evidence that the Stronger One has entered the strong man's house and started carrying people out.

Notice the phrase "finger of God" (Luke 11:20). Jesus's phrase strongly recalls Egypt. When the magicians of Pharaoh could not reproduce the plague of gnats, they told Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God" (Exodus 8:19). Luke invites us to hear the Exodus underneath the exorcism: the same God who broke Pharaoh's grip on Israel is now breaking the enemy's grip on persons. Deliverance from slavery is not a New Testament novelty; it is God's signature.

The second text, 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, gives the study its key word. Paul says our weapons "have divine power to destroy strongholds." The Greek word is *ochyroma*, a military fortress. Then Paul names his targets: "arguments," "every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God," "every thought." The walls, whatever else they are, are made of thoughts. Paul's own campaign is apostolic, against arguments raised against the knowledge of God; this study takes his fortress image as its working picture for something pastoral: a lie (about God, about yourself, about what will make you happy) defended, supplied, and lived in for so long that it feels structural. That is why willpower alone so rarely takes one down: you cannot punch a thought. It has to be besieged with truth and grace.

Do not skip Luke 11:24-26, the unclean spirit returning to the house he left. Luke says he finds it “swept and put in order”; Matthew’s parallel adds the third word, “empty” (Matthew 12:44), and tonight reads the two together. This is the most pastorally urgent paragraph of the night for anyone who has quit a sin before and relapsed worse. Jesus’s warning is that emptiness is not freedom. A vacated house is an advertisement. The goal of this whole study is not a swept house; it is an occupied one, and Sessions 5 and 6 will spend two full evenings on how the Stronger One takes up residence. Tonight, just plant the question.

One caution on tone: this session talks about the devil, and Session 3 will talk about him at length. Keep the center of gravity on Christ. The study is named for him, not for the enemy. If the room gets fascinated or frightened, steer back to Luke 11:22: the strong man’s armor is already taken.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Isaiah 49:24-25. “Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued?” Isaiah asks the question every addict and every habitual sinner asks in the dark: can someone actually get free from a captor this strong? God answers: “Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued, for I will contend with those who contend with you.” Read canonically, Jesus’s strong-man parable embodies the pattern this oracle promises. The group will find this passage themselves in Discovery Moment 2; do not name it in advance.

Exodus 8:19. “The finger of God.” Pharaoh’s own magicians concede that a power beyond every human and occult art has entered the contest. When Jesus takes up the phrase, he frames his exorcisms as a new Exodus: God against the slave-master, and the slave-master losing. The group finds this in Discovery Moment 1.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Augustine of Hippo

Confessions, Book VIII, ch. 5 (§§10-12)

Looking back on the years he could not break with sin, St. Augustine describes, in substance, how his chain was forged: a will bent the wrong way produced disordered desire; desire indulged became habit; and habit unresisted hardened into something that felt like necessity. He calls it a chain of his own making, link by link, holding him bound not by someone else’s iron but by his own will.

For our purposes: the greatest analyst of strongholds in Christian history is a man who lived inside one. He did not get out by trying harder. He got out when grace made the old lie (“you cannot live without this”) sound, at last, like a lie.

Presented as a close summary of Confessions VIII.5.10-12; the chain imagery is Augustine’s own, wording varies by translation.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Leo the Great

Sermon 21, On the Nativity (quoted in CCC 1691)

“Christian, recognize your dignity and, now that you share in God’s own nature, do not return to your former base condition by sinning. Remember who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Never forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light.”

For our purposes: St. Leo's logic is the logic of this study. He does not say "become someone new by fighting harder." He says "remember what you already are." The baptized person fighting a stronghold is not a slave hoping for rescue; he is a rescued man clearing enemy holdouts from liberated territory. And where grave sin has handed ground back, the same Lord who rescued restores: that is Session 5.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Athanasius (the witness of St. Antony of the Desert)

Life of Antony (drawing together several of Antony's discourses on the demons)

St. Athanasius records the desert father St. Antony teaching his monks, in substance, that since the coming of the Lord the enemy is a defeated foe: the demons can threaten, harass, and terrify, but their real power is broken, and they trade on fear precisely because fear is most of what they have left. A steady heart, the sign of the cross, and confidence in Christ scatter what noise and spectacle cannot survive.

For our purposes: one of the Church's great witnesses to spiritual combat insisted the enemy fights from weakness, not strength. As we might put it: the strong man rattles the bars of a cage that is already locked.

Presented as a summary combining several passages of Antony's teaching as recorded by St. Athanasius; not a direct quotation.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 409.** The whole of human history has been marked by a hard combat with the powers of darkness, a battle running from the origin of the world to the last day (summarizing CCC 409, which cites *Gaudium et Spes* 37). The martial imagery names a real conflict. Naming the war is not drama; it is realism.
- **CCC 2853.** Victory over the "prince of this world" was won once for all at the Hour when Jesus freely gave himself up to death to give us his life. The decisive battle was fought on Good Friday, before you were born; what remains is to receive, defend, and live its victory in your own fight.
- **CCC 1691.** St. Leo's "recognize your dignity," placed by the Church at the head of her whole treatment of life in Christ: moral struggle begins from identity, not toward it.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

THE LIAR'S VOICE (planted tonight, resolves Session 8). Tonight's definition (the walls are made of thoughts) invites the question you will ask in the Send section: many walls are braced by a ruling sentence, heard from someone or rehearsed to oneself. Do not resolve where the sentence came from or how it is silenced; that arc runs the whole study and lands on the truth that sets free.

THE ARMOR HE TRUSTED (planted tonight, resolves Session 4). Luke 11:22 says the Stronger One "takes away his armor in which he trusted." Let the phrase hang tonight. In Session 4 the group will reach the study's synthesis (ours, not a claim any single verse makes alone): the enemy's trusted armor is best read as the lie, stripped at the cross, while God issues armor of his own to us (Ephesians 6; leader-prep cross-reference).

THE SWEPT HOUSE (planted tonight, resolves Sessions 5-6). "Swept and put in order" (Luke), with Matthew's added word "empty" (12:44), is the study's standing warning against negative-only

freedom. It will be answered by the sacraments (Session 5) and the renewed mind and opposing virtues (Session 6).

THE WALL (private sealed sheet, distributed tonight with Take-Home 1, opened privately at Session 5). Unlike other studies' sealed guesses, this one is never shared, never collected, never discussed aloud. Say so twice when you hand it out.

SESSION GOALS

1. Establish the covenant of the room: confidentiality, no forced sharing, no one ever asked to name their battle.
2. Define a stronghold from 2 Corinthians 10:3-5: a lie fortified into habit until it feels structural.
3. Read the strong-man parable so the group sees Jesus's exorcisms (and our fight) as the Stronger One plundering a house he has already entered.
4. Recover the Exodus frame: deliverance from slavery is God's signature act (Exodus 8:19; Isaiah 49:24-25).
5. Sound the swept-house warning: freedom is occupancy, not vacancy.
6. Distribute the sealed sheet ("The Wall") with its privacy promise intact.

TIMED PLAN (90 MINUTES)

- Welcome, covenant of the room, opening prayer: 10 min
- Win questions: 10 min
- Build: Luke 11:14-23 with Discovery Moments 1 and 2: 25 min
- Build: 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, defining the stronghold: 15 min
- Build: the swept house and the steelman chain: 15 min
- Send questions, Live It This Week, sealed sheet, closing prayer: 15 min

If time runs short: cut the Dig Deeper box and reduce Win to the second question only. Do not cut the covenant of the room or the sealed-sheet instructions; those two carry the pastoral weight of the whole study.

PASTORAL NOTE FOR THE LEADER (STANDING NOTE, EVERY SESSION)

This study assumes some participants are personally battling a stronghold right now. Three standing rules: (1) No one is ever asked, invited, or pressured to name their battle; sharing questions always offer a general or hypothetical register. (2) State the confidentiality covenant aloud at Session 1 and whenever a new person joins: what is spoken in the room stays in the room, with one exception stated plainly up front: if someone's safety is at risk (harm to self or others, or abuse of the vulnerable), the leader will lovingly involve the help that situation requires. (3) Where a stronghold involves addiction, compulsion, or harm to self or others, your role is to walk the person warmly toward Confession, a spiritual director or pastor, and appropriate professional help (a doctor, a counselor, a recovery group). Grace and good medicine are allies, not rivals; the Church herself insists on that. You are a brother or sister in arms, not a clinician or an exorcist.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, Stronger One, you entered the strong man's house and you were not afraid.

We come tonight with walls we did not plan to build and cannot pull down alone.

You see every one of them, and you are not ashamed of us.

Open the Scriptures to us, open our hearts to you, and begin, tonight, whatever demolition you intend.

We ask this in your holy name, the name every other power obeys. Amen.

WIN: OPENING QUESTIONS

1. Think of a place where you have felt completely safe: a grandparent's kitchen, a childhood fort, a certain pew. What made it feel that way?
2. When you hear the word "stronghold," what picture comes to mind first: something protecting you, or something imprisoning you? Can one building be both?

BUILD: INTO THE TEXT

Read Luke 11:14-23 aloud.

3. Jesus has just freed a man who could not speak. What accusation do some in the crowd make, and how does Jesus take it apart?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

They say he casts out demons "by Beelzebul, the prince of demons" (v. 15). Jesus answers with the logic of civil war: a kingdom divided against itself falls, and Satan does not sabotage his own operation (vv. 17-18). Then he raises the stakes: "if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (v. 20). The exorcism is not entertainment; it is an announcement. The rightful King has landed.

DISCOVERY MOMENT 1

Ask: "Finger of God" is a strange phrase, and Jesus is quoting somewhere. Where has Scripture used it before? Give the group Bibles and this one clue: Egypt, during the plagues. Let them hunt until someone finds Exodus 8:19, where Pharaoh's magicians admit, "This is the finger of God."

Then ask: why would Jesus want an exorcism to sound like the plagues of Egypt? Draw it out: the Exodus is God breaking a slave-master's grip. the exorcism is framed as a new Exodus; and in this study's image, every stronghold is a little Egypt.

4. Look at the parable in verses 21-22. Who is the strong man? What is his palace? And who is the "one stronger than he"?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The strong man is Satan; the palace with its goods is the territory he holds, including persons he holds captive; the Stronger One is Christ. Notice the tense of the whole scene: Jesus is not promising

to assail the strong man someday. The exorcism the crowd just watched is the plundering in progress. The Stronger One is already inside the house, carrying people out.

And notice what the Stronger One takes first: “his armor in which he trusted.” Keep that phrase; this study will come back for it.

DISCOVERY MOMENT 2

Say: centuries before this, Israel’s prophets asked out loud whether rescue from a captor this strong is even possible, and God answered. Send the group to Isaiah 49 and have them hunt for the question and the answer (they are looking for verses 24-25).

Have someone read verses 24-25 aloud in full from their Bible (abridged here): “Can the prey be taken from the mighty...? Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued, for I will contend with those who contend with you.” Ask: who does the contending in that verse? Land the point gently: the question is not whether you are strong enough. It never was.

Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 aloud.

5. Paul says our weapons “have divine power to destroy strongholds.” Then he tells us what he is aiming at: “arguments,” “every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God,” “every thought.” What does that tell us the fortress walls are made of?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Thoughts. Paul aims at arguments and thoughts raised against the knowledge of God: whatever else the walls are, they are made of thoughts. In pastoral experience, the load-bearing ones are lies: about God (“he is holding out on you”), about yourself (“this is just who you are”), about happiness (“you cannot live without this”), defended and supplied so long they feel structural. That is why willpower alone so rarely brings one down; you cannot punch a thought. It has to be besieged: starved of supply, answered with truth, and handed over to the divine power Paul is talking about.

Our working definition for the whole study, offered as our pastoral application of Paul’s image rather than as his dictionary entry: a stronghold is a lie fortified into habit until it feels like home.

Read Luke 11:24-26 aloud.

Then read Matthew 12:43-45 aloud (Matthew’s parallel).

6. Luke says the returning spirit finds the house “swept and put in order”; Matthew adds the word “empty.” Things end worse than they began. What is missing from that house? Why is “empty” not the same as “free”?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The house is clean but unoccupied. Nobody moved in. Jesus is warning against negative-only freedom: quitting a sin creates a vacuum, and a vacuum is an advertisement. Anyone who has white-knuckled a habit into remission and relapsed worse knows this paragraph from the inside, and it is in the Bible because Jesus knew it first, without condemnation and without illusion.

The goal of this study is not a swept house. It is an occupied one. How the Stronger One takes up residence is where Sessions 5 and 6 are headed; for now, just hold the warning.

Build, Then Press: The Skeptic's Case

BUILD THE OBJECTION AT FULL STRENGTH

Someone you love says this, and means it kindly: "Strongholds are just psychology. Neuroscience has mapped the habit loop: cue, routine, reward. Therapy and medication genuinely free people every day. Dressing a dopamine circuit up as a demon is superstition, and it is not harmless: some religious people have used devil-talk to shame the suffering or to talk them out of the treatment that would actually have helped them."

Let the group sit with it. Have them name what is right in it before anyone answers it. (A good deal is right in it.)

7. Now press: what did we just watch Jesus do in Luke 11, and what does the Church actually teach about medicine, psychology, and the enemy? Can both be real?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Grant the truth first: the habit loop is real, therapy and medicine are gifts, and the Church esteems them; her prudent practice ordinarily includes serious medical and psychological evaluation before anything extraordinary is ever concluded. Any spirituality that shames the suffering or blocks treatment is not Catholic.

But Luke 11 will not let us stop there. Jesus heals a real affliction and names a real, personal enemy behind human slavery, and the Church has never demythologized him: Satan is a fallen creature, active, and yet strictly limited, "not infinite" in power (Session 3 will spend a whole evening here). The Catholic answer is both/and: strongholds have an anatomy (habit, wound, chemistry), and there is also a strategist in the field who can exploit any of it. The Church neither diagnoses a demon behind every struggle nor pretends the enemy is fiction: treating the anatomy while denying the war leaves the siege half-understood; blaming a demon while refusing help for the anatomy is presumption. Grace does not compete with good medicine; grace enlists it.

DIG DEEPER (IF TIME ALLOWS)

Colossians 2:15: at the cross God "disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him." A closely related disarming image to Luke 11:22: the armor is already off.

Hebrews 2:14-15: through death Christ destroyed "him who has the power of death, that is, the devil," and delivered "all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage." The mechanism of the victory, stated outright.

1 John 3:8: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." The premise of this whole study, in one sentence.

A modern voice, honestly labeled: the Anglican writer C. S. Lewis observed in the preface to *The Screwtape Letters* that there are two equal and opposite errors about the devils: disbelief in them, and an unhealthy fascination with them. Tonight's steelman is the first error; Session 3 will guard the second.

SEND: TAKING IT OUT

8. Where in your life have you settled for “swept and empty” (a habit merely paused, a vacancy) instead of occupied? You do not need to say it aloud; name it to yourself honestly.

9. Many walls are braced by a ruling sentence: something somebody once said to you, or something you have said to yourself so long it sounds like your own voice. If yours is, this week, without judging it yet, try to hear the sentence under the wall, and ask whose voice it first was. And if your battle is not sentence-shaped, map its triggers and moments instead; both are reconnaissance.

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- **Morning surrender.** Each morning this week, before your feet do anything important, pray one line: “Jesus, Stronger One, this house is yours.” Seven words, seven days.
- **Reconnaissance, not scorekeeping.** Keep a small private tally of when the old pull shows up: the moment, the mood, the place. You are not grading yourself; you are mapping the enemy’s approach routes. Bring the map (in your head) next week; Session 2 is about how walls get built.
- **Reread.** Midweek, read Luke 11:14-26 slowly, once, and stop on the phrase “one stronger than he.”

THE WALL (SEALED SHEET, HAND OUT WITH TAKE-HOME 1)

Hand each person the sealed sheet attached to Take-Home 1 and say, twice, plainly: no one will ever read this but you. In one sentence, they name the wall they most want down, fold it, seal it, and write their own name on the outside. They bring it back each week unopened. At Session 5, each person will open it alone, in silence, before the Lord.

Say also, warmly and without singling anyone out: if what you are writing involves harm to yourself or anyone else, or a grip you already know is beyond your strength, the bravest thing you can do this week is tell one trusted person: a priest, a counselor, a doctor. Asking for help is a weapon, not a defeat.

CLOSING PRAYER

Stronger One, you have seen the wall we each just named, and you saw it long before tonight.

We do not ask you to help us defend it. We ask you to take it down, in your time, by your power, with the weapons that are not worldly.

Guard this room and everyone in it; let what was spoken here rest here.

Our Father...

SCRIPTURE MEMORY

“For the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds.”

2 Corinthians 10:4

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 1, in order:

1. Luke 11:14-23 (main reading: Beelzebul accusation, finger of God, the strong man and the Stronger One)
2. Exodus 8:19 (Discovery Moment 1: “This is the finger of God”)
3. Luke 11:21-22 (the parable: the armor in which he trusted)
4. Isaiah 49:24-25 (Discovery Moment 2: the captives of the mighty rescued)
5. 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 (divine power to destroy strongholds; every thought captive)
6. Luke 11:24-26 with Matthew 12:43-45 (the swept house; Matthew supplies “empty”)
7. Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8 (Dig Deeper: the victory’s mechanism)
8. 2 Corinthians 10:4 (memory verse)
9. Leader-prep cross-references (not read in group): Ephesians 6 (Thread Watch)