

Imaging the Word: **Art & Theology**

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants



Matthew 21:33–41

³³ Jesus said: “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. ³⁴ When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. ³⁵ The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. ³⁶ Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. ³⁷ But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ ³⁸ But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.’ ³⁹ They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?’ ⁴¹ They said to Him, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the due season.”

⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”

⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴ And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.”

⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.

Reflection

In this parable, the owner of the vineyard has been treated disrespectful by the tenants of his vineyard, who reject his claim not just on the produce but the vineyard itself. He sent messengers to reestablish his authority but they beat and murdered them. So the vineyard owner must answer this question for himself: What is to be done with his anger? Will he allow his enemies to dictate the nature of his response? He is in a position of power. So retaliation is not only possible; it's expected! But is further violence the only answer?

The landowner ultimately decides against retaliation. He instead allows them one more chance. To the reader's surprise, the vineyard owner decides not to send in the cavalry, but rather his beloved son, reasoning that "they will respect my son." Or rather that they will feel shame in his presence. That is what he is hoping for—the murderous tenants to be inspired by his son to recognize the shameful nature of their actions! Is this not outrageously stupid? Perhaps. But it is also daring.

But, alas, the wicked tenants display no honor, or shame. The son's arrival inspires not self-awareness on the part of the tenants, but rather murder and theft, the tenants having conceived the wild notion that as squatters they would end up with land if they killed the owner's son. They throw the son out of the vineyard and kill him there, so as not to contaminate the vineyard with his blood.

Jesus' aim of course is to trap his listeners, the chief priests and the Pharisees, in their own judgement. To the following question: "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?", his audience answers him: "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their season." The setup, you see, has worked perfectly. For, they do not realize that they have just condemned themselves. They do not perceive that they are in fact the tenants in the story. They are renters in the vineyard (Israel) who are indeed producing fruits but are taking the fruits for themselves and refusing to give God his share. Moreover, when God sends His servants (the prophets), they, or rather their predecessors, beat them, stoned them, and killed them. What will they do now when God sends his Beloved Son to them? And what will happen when they reject and kill him too? Jesus affirms their self-condemnation: "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits."

That sounds rather harsh. But we must remember Jesus is not all about giving us cookies and puppydog kisses. He came to tell us the truth. In the parable of the wicked tenants, the tenants take advantage of the landowner's self-restraint, acting with seeming impunity, until they go too far and cross the line and are thrown out. Here, we see that God is exceedingly patient with us, but we are warned, we must not take that graciousness for granted.

In the following paintings, the artists have sought to bring out the drama—the pathos, and the horror—of Jesus' parable, all the better to draw us too into the story, until we, like the chief priests and Pharisees, see ourselves as subject to God's judgement and mercy.

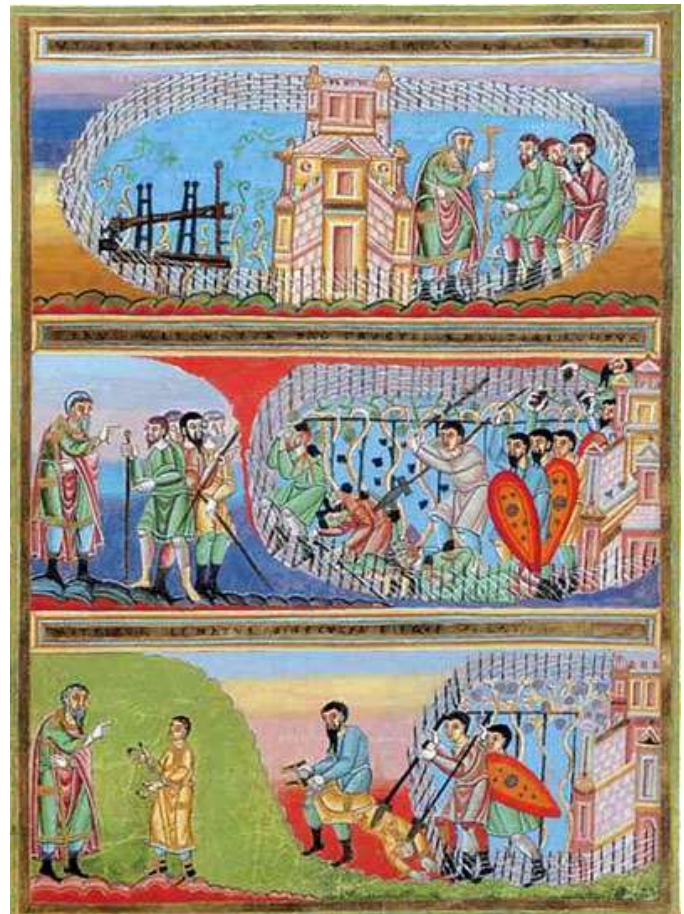
Artistic Illumination



The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen, from *Speculum humanae salvationis*. Cologne, frater Nycolaus (scribe); c. 1450

Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen, from Codex Aureus of Echternach, c1030

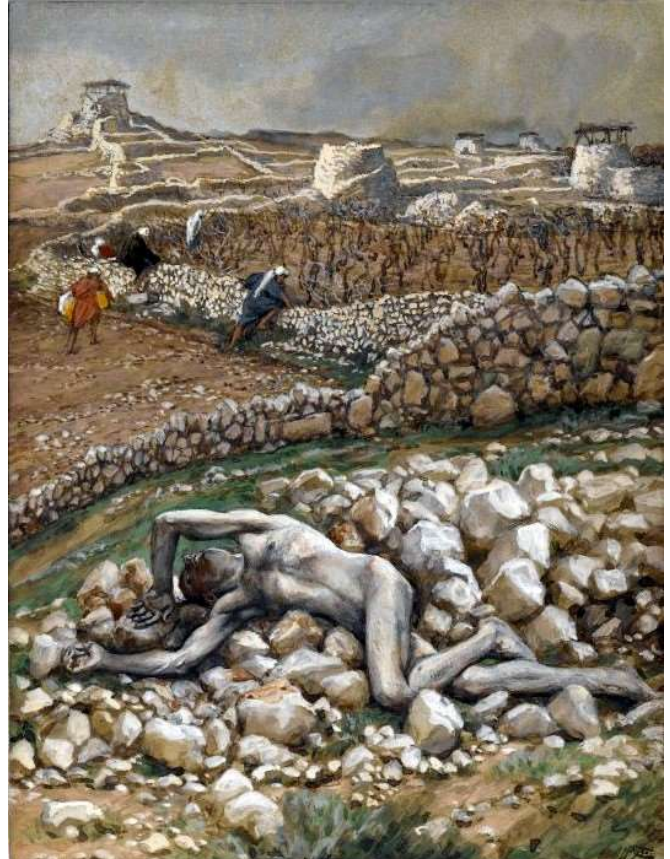
This medieval illumination shows the events of the parable sequentially (like a comic strip), ending with the murder of the son. The ultimate expulsion of the wicked tenants, which is not actually described but only implied, is left out, or left to the viewer's imagination.





Abel Grimmer (1570-1619), *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants*, c1590

Small paintings, such as this one, carry an intimacy which large paintings rarely have. We need to stand close to them and carefully look to see all the detail. This, combined with the fact that our painting is round, really enhances the feeling that we are almost looking at the scene through a small window or a camera lens. The small group on the hill is composed of Christ and His disciples. They are portrayed in classical dress, rather than in 16th-century clothing like the other figures. So it separates Jesus as the narrator from the rest of the scene. The bottom right scenes show the abuse and killing of the servants. The vineyard in the background is painted showing no fruit, which conveys the understanding that wickedness cannot bear fruit.



James Jacques Tissot (French, 1836-1902), *The Son of the Vineyard (Le fils de la vigne)*, 1886-1894

Here, the vineyard owner's son (in the foreground) has been beaten, stripped, and left to rot like so much garbage in a pile outside the vineyard. The paleness of the figure is striking, as it almost blends into the stone around him, thus sending a shock to the viewer upon their awareness.



**The Wicked Husbandmen, Illustration in
Mother Stories from the New Testament,
Published 1906 by Howard E. Altemus**

Here, as below, the tenants are portrayed as lying in wait to pounce on the owner's servant. Their maliciousness is not an act of passion but premeditated, adding to the foulness of their actions.



**Evelyn Stewart Hardy (British, 1866),
The Wicked Husbandmen, 20th cent**

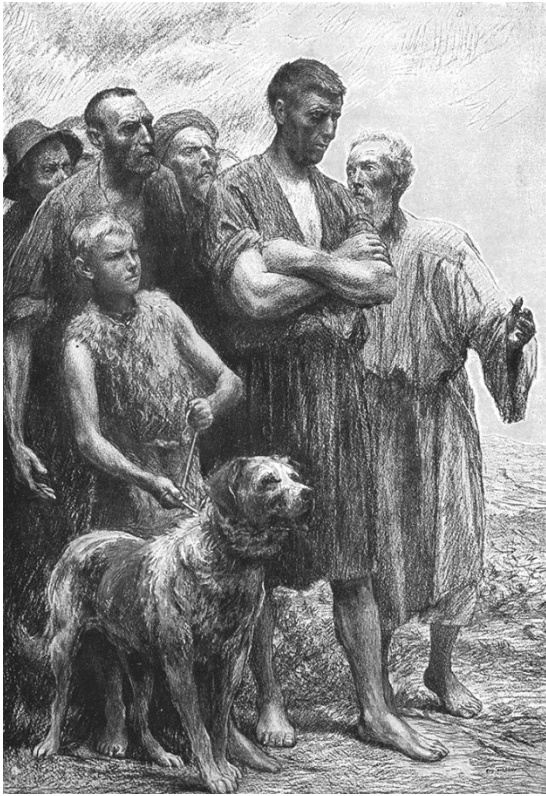
***The Wicked Husbandmen. Illustration for
Scripture Picture-Book (SPCK, c1890)***

Here the son is pinned and held up in such a way that it suggests that the tenants are about to nail him to the cross-shaped vine support behind him, a clear indication of the son's identification with Jesus.



**John Everett Millais (British, 1829–1896),
The Wicked Husbandman, 1864**

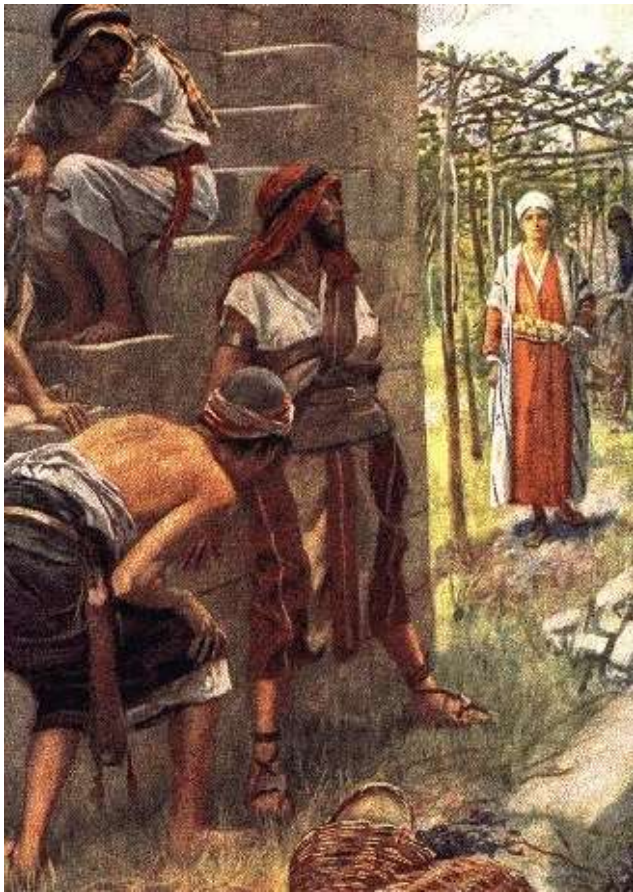
The vine twisted around the neck of the husbandman's heir shows the lengths Millais went to in order to produce an accurate description of nature. The dead bird and toad in the right foreground enhance the sense of evil.



Eugene Burnand, (Swiss, 1850-1921), *Wicked Vinedressers*, 1899, part of a series of paintings on the parables, published in 1908.

In this series of three drawings, Burnand depicts the drama and tragedy of the parable: the hard-hearted tenants, the young innocent son, and the consequences of their meeting—the son's dead body lying in a ditch outside the vineyard.





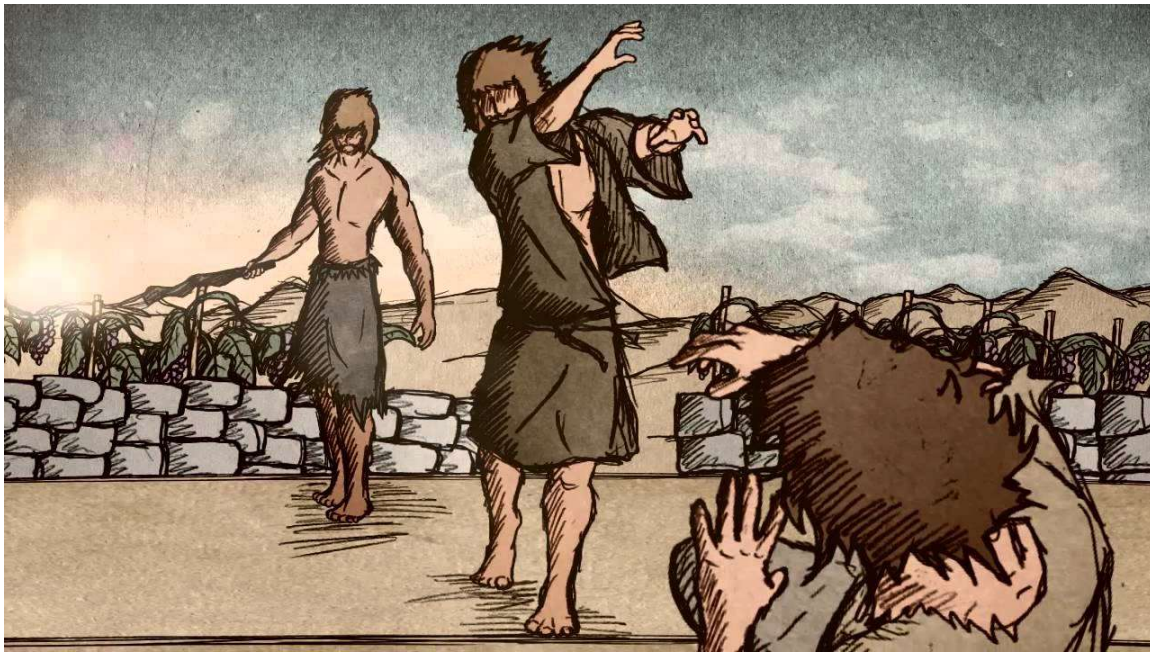
Harold Copping (British, 1863 -1932)



The Classic Bible Art Collection (formerly Standard Publishing)

Bible Illustrations of the Parable





Animation commissioned for the Savior Musical (Saviormusical.com). Watch the whole video [here](#).

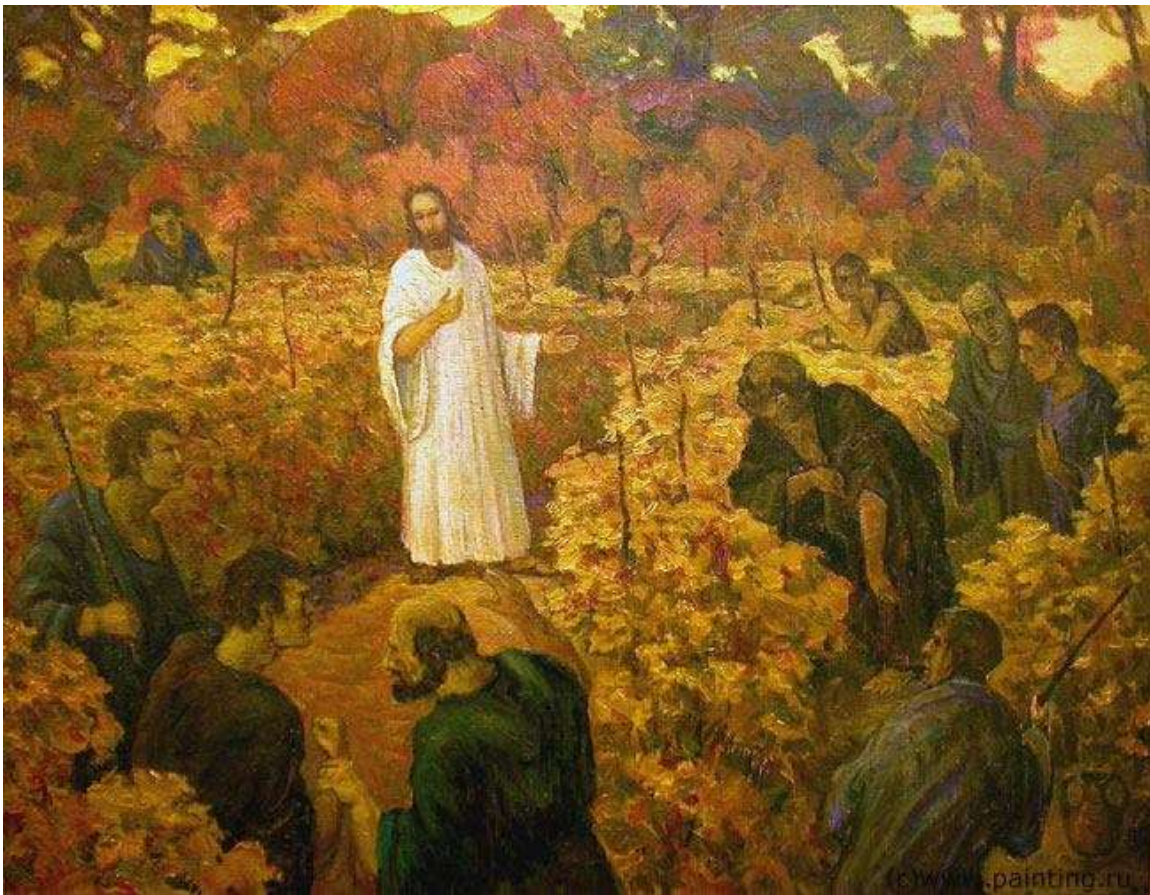


Herman Leon, *Matthew 21*



James B Janknegt (American, 1953-), *The Wicked Tenants*, 2008

Here, the central event of the parable, the arrival of the son, is shown in sequence: his arrival to the vineyard, his expulsion from the vineyard (whose vine supports again are cross-shaped), and his landing in an open grave/landfill.



Anatoly Venedyukhin (Russian, 1938-), *Wicked Vinegrowers*, 1999

Here the son of the vineyard owner is clearly identified as Jesus, as he is surrounded by a mob of tenants who clearly mean to do him harm.



Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald (American, 1900-48), *The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen*



Ian Pollock (Irish, 1975-), *Vineyard and Householder*

Pollock found this parable unfathomable. Jesus asks his disciples what the owner of a vineyard would do if its tenants murdered his servants and then his son. The disciples reply that he would bring those bad men to a bad end and give the vineyard to other tenants. "Have you never read in the scriptures?" Jesus retorts reproachfully, before giving an answer that seems to agree with them: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the main cornerstone." Pollock says: "I could get no moral guidance from it." His painting thus represents generic threats, but is evocative nonetheless.



Andrei Nikolaevich Miranov (Russian, Parable of the Evil Winegrowers, 2018

“On the far right is Christ, who entered a certain room, perhaps the very tower spoken of in the parable, which has the meaning of the Temple of Jerusalem, and therefore the Church of our forefathers. But this is not Christ punishing, for the time is not yet, but Christ preaching, striving to reason and call the winegrowers to conscience...

However, the faces of the vinedressers, for the most part, are not the faces of elders, but rather of youths, which shows the spiritual age of those who met Christ on the threshold of the Old and New Testaments, and honor in the first - a baby, and in the second - an experienced husband, for the Law of Moses is the cradle of humanity on the eve of the fulfillment of the perfect Commandments...

Here someone, seeing the accuser of his conscience, like the first man in heaven, Adam, decided to cover himself with old clothes. Madman, is it possible to hide from God? Following him is a thief and robber who has appropriated God's for himself. He hides the money he earns from winemaking, wanting to spend it as his own, but not God's. Here is a certain old man, who has surpassed the madness of others, no longer hides anything and does not complain, but points to Christ and gives a sign to someone: he is the son of the Master, let's kill Him!

When the Antichrist comes, he will also not be against Christ. Here “anti” is not so much “against” as “instead”. And the holy place will not be empty. So in the picture there are three people sitting at the table. Only the “throne” of the “anti-trinity” is a barrel of wine, which delights the soul with false and short-term joy. However, the wine was itself made from the fruits of the same vineyard given by God, for all evil is not something external, but misunderstood, or a conscious perverted order from God...

In the background we see a ladder - an image of the Lord's death on the cross and also a “spiritual ladder”; a sickle - a symbol of the harvest, that is, the end of times and a individual judgment of man; garden shears, symbolizing the words of Christ: “every branch of Me that does not bear fruit, He cuts off” (John 15:2); as

well as a woman with a vessel, who is an image of the Samaritan woman at the well and the New Testament Church in the person of the first apostles, to whom the people of God will be entrusted. From now on, the universe will become a vineyard and Christ's disciples will carry the word of God throughout the world and into the soul of every person, for the Lord said at the end of his parable: "the vineyard will be given to other vinedressers, giving the fruits in their own time."

from the artist's [page](#)