

*Imaging the Word:  
Art & Theology*

The Parable of Vineyard Owner and his Workers  
(Matthew 20:1-16)

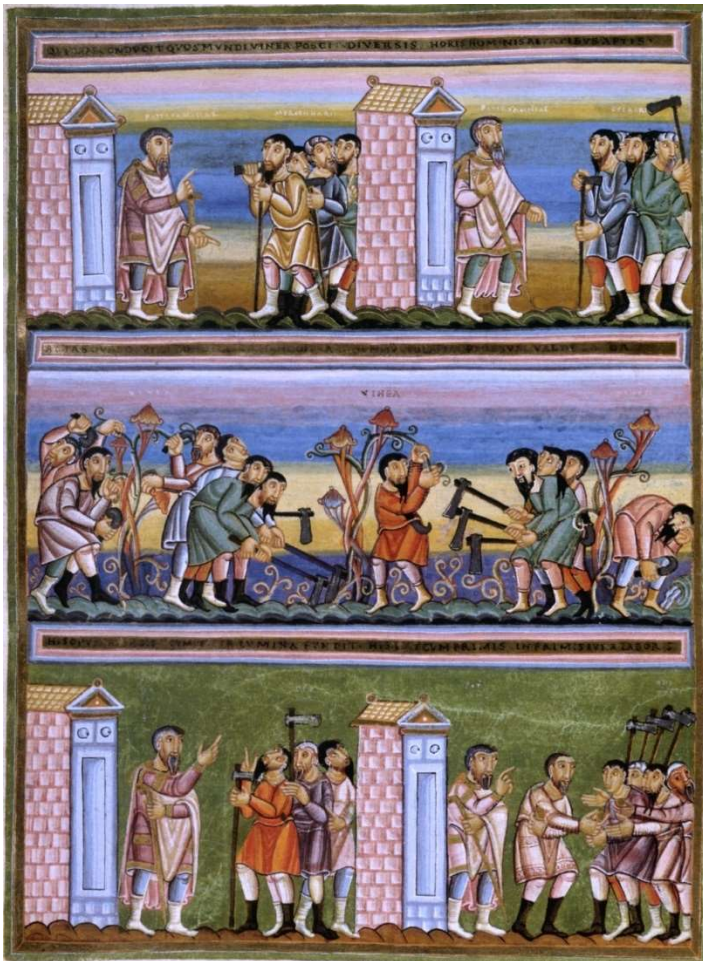


**Matthew 20:1-16**

<sup>1</sup> “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the laborers for a silver piece a day, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> And going out about 9 o’clock he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, <sup>4</sup> and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ <sup>5</sup> So they went. Going out again about noon and 3 o’clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup> And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ <sup>7</sup> They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ <sup>8</sup> And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ <sup>9</sup> And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup> And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, <sup>12</sup> saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ <sup>13</sup> But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend,’ I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ <sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first last.”

As we see in the parable of the Vineyard, God is not just but he is good. When we begrudge that goodness, that graciousness, it is only because we have forgotten where we are in line. For, from where we stand, at the end of the line, we can see the actions of the landowner for what they are—as a reflection of his goodness, his graciousness, that extends not just to those like us at the end of the line, but to all those who came before us, who though worthier than us, nevertheless did not deserve what they received—a place in God’s kingdom, a seat at the table of the Vineyard Owner who wants *everyone* to share in his joy and to enjoy the abundance of his goodness. No, God is not fair; but God *is* good. In the following paintings, the “unjust graciousness” of God is on full display, and we are challenged to accept it and embrace it.

## ART REFLECTIONS



Workers in the Vineyard from *Codex Aureus of Echternach* (1030-50, Nuremburg)

In the works to the left, the Parable of the Vineyard Workers is depicted in story-board form, like a comic book, with discreet images depicting the various actions of the story, or else the actions taking place simultaneously in different scenes on the same piece . One may assume that, at least for the earlier works, this was done so as to identify the parable for an illiterate audience. Similar depictions by more recent artists likely continue this as a custom, whether consciously or not.



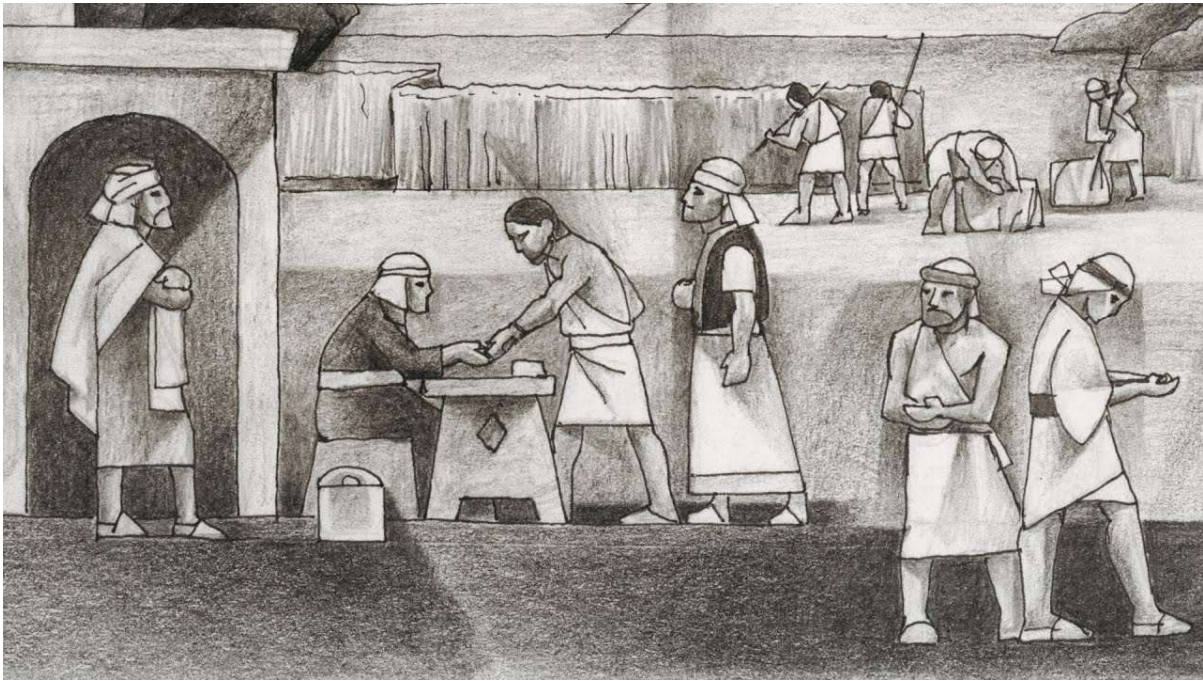
Parable of Workers in the Vineyard from the lectionary of Henry III, c. 1050. by an unknown German miniaturist



Gerard de Jode (Dutch, 1516/7-91)  
*The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard*, 1585



Arsen Birch (21<sup>st</sup> century, Ukrainian), *The Parable about Vineyard Workers*



Jorge Cocco Santángelo , *Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard*



Nelly Bube (Kazakhstan, 1949-), *The Workers in the Vineyard*



Jim Janknegt (American, 1953-), *The Day Laborers*



J. Kirk Richards (American, b.1976), *Laborers in the Vineyard*, 2003

This scene comes from the end of the parable, at the close of the day, when all of the laborers are at work. Unless one knew of the story, one would assume that all these laborers are equal. The fact that the painting depicts a night scene, when distinctions are difficult to see (“when all dogs are black”), reinforces the view of an inherent equality among the workers.

In the following pieces, the artists have chosen to depict only the final scene of the parable, the “crisis point,” where the landowner pays all the workers the same daily wage, regardless of when they started work. The artistic focus is on the expression of indignation on the part of the laborers who started in the morning. Also depicted are the delight and surprise (and sometimes snickering) of those who began laboring late in the day



Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (Dutch, 1606-1669), *Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard*, 1637



Patrick Paearz de Wet, *Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard*, mid-17th century



Follower of Frans Floris the Elder (Flemish, c1519 -1570),  
*The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard* (Matthew 20:1-16)

In this busy scene can be discerned several characters from Jesus' parable: a laborer just in from the field (bottom left), a laborer reaching over the table for coins while the owner is distracted (top center), the master holding up a hand to one laborer whose own hand is extended for his pay (top right), and another laborer leaning forward commandingly for his wages (center). What the viewer can read in this scene is that the most recent laborer (who has already been paid in this scene) is a thief, taking what he has not earned; laborers who had worked longer expect more pay, with one beseeching the owner with pity (right) and the other demanding more (center). And yet widening out from this central exchange, we see still more laborers waiting their turn, including one that only now has quit his labors for the day (bottom left). Thus, the laborers with whom the master is presently arguing are not the longest working laborers. (According to the parable, the workers are paid in reverse order to when they arrived.) Those who have yet to be paid have even more reason to expect, demand more pay, than the ones arguing with the master.

What is also interesting about this scene is the inclusion of women and children, presumably the family of the laborers. Their presence in the scene serves to remind the viewer that the laborers are themselves imbedded in larger networks of dependency, and thus the question of fair wages for workers cannot be isolated from the consequences for the wider community.



Jacob Xavery (Dutch, 1736-1769), *Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard*, 1768



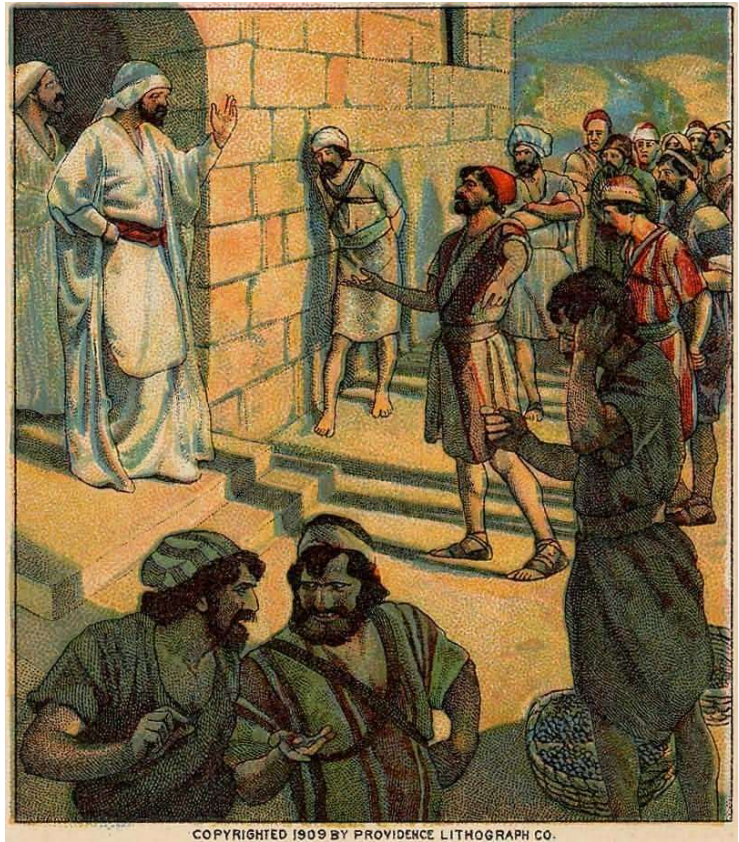
Peter Gorban (Russian, 1923-1995), *Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard*, 1990

Note how the anger of the laborer is indicated by his angular stance, hunched shoulders, and arms stiffly pressed down on the desk. Note, too, that he is also alone, whereas the joy of the undeserved wages is shared among the laborers at the right.

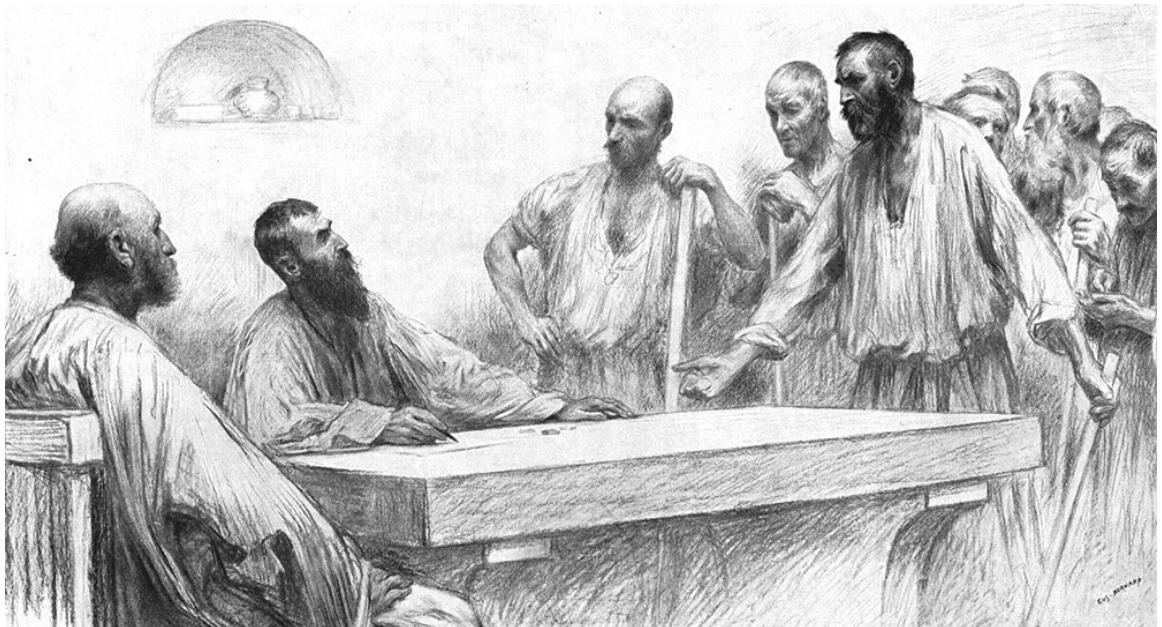


Arthur A. Dixon, The Laborers in the Vineyard, illustration in *The Work of God's Children* (1909)

Note the reactions of the three groups of laborers: anger, amazement, and joy



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Eugene Burnard (Swiss, 1850 - 1921), *Parable of the Generous Landowner*, 1908

Note how visually similar the landowner and the early laborer are depicted, all the more striking given how dissimilar they are in their attitudes towards wages.



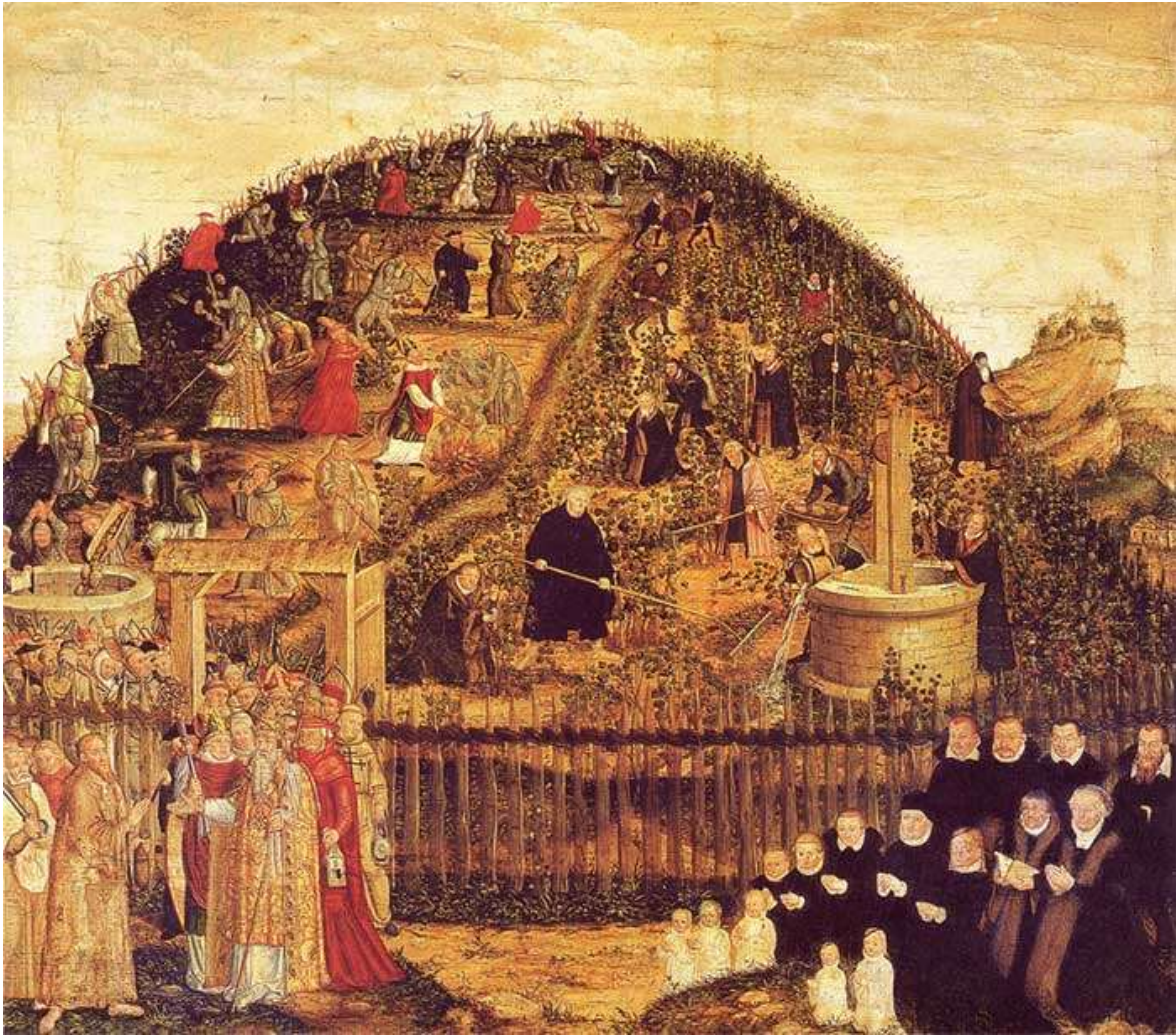
In some ways, the characters in Jesus' parables are comical parodies of real people. Here in this cartoon, we get a sense of the ridiculousness of the grievance of the early morning laborers.



Andrei Nikolaevich Miranov (Russian, b1975), *Parable of the Vineyard*, 2011

Miranov's painting here depicts Jesus as the vineyard owner, who has just paid the newest workers and is now paying those who began working earlier in the day. In contrast to other paintings of this scene, the newest workers don't express any emotion here, either of delight or condescension, as they count their money. The other workers are also stone-faced. Yet one of the older workers gestures to himself, as if to question Jesus' determination of his value, while at the same time the man behind him appears to be pondering Jesus' explanation of the justness of the "pay scale."

## *The Vineyard of the Lord*



Lucas Cranach the Younger (German, 1515-86), *The Vineyard of the Lord*, 1569

In 1569, at the height of the Lutheran Reformation, Lucas Cranach the Younger (1515-1586) painted “The Vineyard of the Lord” (*Der Weinberg des Herrn*). Cranach, along with his father, Lucas Cranach the Elder, was one of the most important German painters of the Reformation era. He and his father were staunch supporters of the teachings of Martin Luther and the other Reformers. The painting is hanging in Martin Luther’s parish church of St. Mary’s in Wittenberg. Cranach created this painting in memory of the Reformer Paul Eber, who lectured on theology in Wittenberg.

“The Vineyard of the Lord” depicts a vineyard enclosed by a fence, the biblical metaphor for the Christian Church on earth. At the left of the vineyard are representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, who are destroying it. At the right is Luther with a rake and other Reformers taking care of the plants by watering them and pulling out the weeds.

In this painting, Cranach is explaining the meaning of the Reformation by portraying the Catholic clergy and the Lutheran reformers as different kinds of laborers in the vineyard of the Lord. It is a visual parody of a statement that Pope Leo X had made in response to Luther’s

posting of his Ninety-five Theses. The pope excommunicated Luther, tossing him out of the Church, exclaiming famously, “The wild boar from the forest seeks to destroy the vineyard.”

The pope was claiming that Martin Luther was a “wild boar” who had arisen to destroy God’s Church. Pope Leo said that it was his duty to protect the vineyard of the Lord from the ravishing of the wild boar. However, Cranach sets the record straight. He demonstrates who is actually destroying the vineyard and who is taking care of it. He succinctly explains the entire meaning of the Reformation in one image!



On the left side, the vineyard has withered from neglect and mismanagement. The pope, cardinals, bishops, priests and monks are hard at work—ripping out the vines and throwing rocks into the well. They are destroying the Church with their “false doctrines” of the worship of Mary and the saints, purgatory, penance, indulgence, etc. They have ripped out the true salvation story contained in the words and person of Jesus Christ, who is the Vine to whom we are connected by faith (John 15:5). They have thrown rocks down the well of him who is the Water of life (John 4:13).

Is it propaganda? Absolutely. Which doesn't make it a necessarily bad interpretation. Just an advantageous one. Indeed, there is another, more important lesson promoted here before the propaganda (literally, in front of the vineyard in the painting), one which hearkens back to Jesus’ Parable of the Vineyard Workers.

In this painting, the workers on the left (Pope, cardinals, priests, monks and nuns) are exhausting the ground and proving to be poor caretakers of the vineyard. At the conclusion of their day, they march out of the vineyard, following the Pope. In contrast, on the right, leaders of the Protestant Reformation - including Martin Luther - provide loving care for the vineyard. Below them, at bottom right, is Paul Eber and his family (including thirteen children, those who died as infants are dressed in white). Eber was a theology professor, hymn writer, and Bible translator.

At the left lower corner, the Lord of the vineyard pays the wages to the workers. First paid are the Pope and his workers. The Pope holds a coin in his hand and appears to be asking for more. The Lord of the vineyard holds up his hand, rejecting the demand for additional wages. Martin Luther and the other Reformers are the ones who came late to work but were given the same pay as those who worked a full day. They are portrayed as humble, continuing to work rather than demanding their pay from the Lord.



What the painting may fail to convey, though, is that all the workers were unworthy of their Lord's generosity. Those who came late in the day were unworthy because they really didn't earn their pay. Those who worked all day are unworthy because they were dissatisfied with what God gave them. At the heart of the story is the truth that both sets of workers are dependent on the goodness and generosity of the Lord.



The preeminence of God's grace, over against human desserts, was at the center of Luther's teachings right to the end. In his last moments, Luther was asked by his friend Justus Jonas, "Do you want to die standing firm on Christ and the doctrine you have taught?" He answered emphatically, "Yes!" Luther's last words were: "We are beggars. This is true." And so we are!