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**Jacopo Bassano transposes the message of Jesus' parable of the sower into this image of a farming family's daily work and their harvest.**

*Jacopo Bassano (1515-1592), THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER (c. 1560). Oil on canvas. 61" x 57". Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain. Photo: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza / Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

# Labor's Reward

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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In *The Parable of the Sower*, Jacopo Bassano features a scene of daily work by a country family in the foreground. The artist typically used genre scenes (everyday scenes) as the main portion of the composition and placed the biblical subject in a secondary area. While a young girl is feeding the sheep, and a young boy and his mother seem to be moving something towards the sleeping dog, an older woman is readying a blanket with bread for a meal. The gaze of the three women directs our attention to the bread. To the left a young man in a hat is attending to the oxen that draw the plough. In the right middle ground of the composition, a farmer is casting seed by hand. He is the figure who is most closely associated with the sower in Jesus' parable (Matthew 13:3-9; Mark 4:3-9; Luke 8:5-8). The sack of seeds visible under the tree completes the equipment required for his work. Paolo Berdini concludes, "Together [the figures of the two men] present the instrument and the labor necessary for sowing the soil."<sup>1</sup> Berdini suggests the actions of all the figures are unified by the bread in the foreground. As sowing leads to harvest and seed leads to bread as cause and effect, the figures' actions "present the requisite components of a statement about the essential dynamics of agrarian existential determinism: work and reward."<sup>2</sup>

Bassano's dramatic visualization of farming life is the sort of storytelling in pictures that Jesus would admire. After all, why did Jesus speak in parables? The most common definition of a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly message. As is the case with many good teachers, Jesus was a good storyteller who sincerely hoped listeners would follow and be entertained by his narrative, visualize its context, and discern its meaning. Jacopo Bassano depicts the context beautifully and memorably in this rural scene of the family activity of sowing seeds and working the land. Such biblical-pastoral scenes as this were a compositional innovation by Bassano in the 1560s and established a reputation for the artist in the area known as the Veneto in northeastern Italy.<sup>3</sup>

Another Baroque painter also working in the Veneto, Domenico Fetti, frequently depicted Jesus' parables. Of the thirty-three parables, Fetti painted twelve of the scenes. In addition to *The Parable of the Vineyard* (c. 1616) shown on the following page, there are nine other known versions, painted by either the artist or his assistants, of this parable found in Matthew 20:1-16.

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*Domenico Fetti (1588/89-1624), THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD (c. 1616). Oil on wood. 29 7/8" x 17 1/2". Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, Italy. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

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Fetti was born in Rome, but his affinity for the parables as subject matter grew as he encountered them in the paintings of Northern artists such as Jacopo Bassano, Paolo Veronese, and Jacopo Tintoretto while he was working for the Duke of Mantua in Northern Italy. Parables were exceptionally popular during the Italian Catholic Reformation period of the first quarter of the seventeenth century. Fetti was a spiritual man and “the parables appealed to [his] imagination for their narrative gift of presenting didactic truths in the guise of mundane experience,” according to art historian and Fetti scholar, Pamela Askew.<sup>4</sup>

Traditionally the parable of the vineyard has been interpreted allegorically as a warning to believers: "the reward for their labors is not to be measured in terms of gain or privilege."<sup>5</sup> Believers must be charitable to their fellow human beings and show humility before God. It is God's grace that will help them enter the kingdom of God rather than how hard or how long they have worked. In the foreground of the painting is a laborer who has returned from an entire day's work, which is longer than the others who have received the same wage. Tired, he leans on his shovel, and protesting with arms closed across his chest, listens as the landowner explains how he determined the wages. The artist suggests that the landowner expresses the will of God by representing him as seated, enthroned as it were before the symbolic wall of heaven.<sup>6</sup>

Fetti's composition is classically organized. The primary characters are staged in a balanced and symmetrical manner centered in the foreground. Emotion is conveyed through body position and hand gesture in a typically Baroque expressiveness that is characteristic of Fetti.

Like Jacopo Bassano in the previous generation, Domenico Fetti produces a dramatic visualization of Jesus' parable. Neither artist attempts a literal rendering, but each offers a transposition of the parable's message into an image of work in their own day.

## NOTES

1 Paolo Berdini, "Jacopo Bassano: A Case for Painting as Visual Exegesis," in Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, eds., *Interpreting Christian Art: Reflections on Christian Art* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 169-186, here citing 175.

2 *Ibid.*, 176.

3 "Jacopo Bassano, *The Parable of the Sower*, ca. 1560," Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain, [www.museothyssen.org/en/thyssen/ficha\\_obra/949](http://www.museothyssen.org/en/thyssen/ficha_obra/949) (accessed May 29, 2015).

4 Pamela Askew, "The Parable Paintings of Domenico Fetti," *Art Bulletin*, 43:1 (March 1961), 21-45, here citing 22.

5 *Ibid.*, 39.



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