

# Matthias Erzberger, “The Gospel of Work“ (July 8, 1919)

## Abstract

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Matthias Erzberger (1875–1921) rose from a modest, Catholic background to become one of the most prominent and important politicians during the First World War and the early years of the Weimar Republic. That he did so without having a noble pedigree, background of military service, or a university degree made his rise all the more remarkable and testified to his formidable capacity for hard work. He referred to that capacity here, as he praised the value of hard work as a social and a national good.

First elected as a member of the Catholic Center Party (Zentrum) to the Reichstag in 1903, under the old Imperial government, Erzberger quickly mastered that legislative body’s procedural practices in minute detail. He initially supported Germany’s aggressive pursuit of military victory in the First World War, but his position had evolved by 1917 into one of advocating for an immediate, negotiated peace. Erzberger later led the four-person German delegation that signed the Armistice on November 11, 1918, a necessary and thankless task that made him a target of relentless right-wing attacks. Less than three years later, on August 26, 1921, a far-right hit squad assassinated Matthias Erzberger during one of his morning walks.

At the time he made the remarks here, Erzberger had been in his position as Minister of Finance for just over two weeks, and he clearly intended them as a ringing conclusion to a somewhat technical and dry sixteen-page speech on taxation and financial reform. (Note that Erzberger did sneak in a declaration at the end of the second paragraph about how a socially-minded tax system provided the surest expression of a nation’s sense of justice and equality.) That speech, delivered before the National Assembly in early July 1919, came at a very low point in the country’s morale—just two weeks after the National Assembly had, with bitter reluctance, ratified the Versailles Treaty. At the same time, it also came at a potential moment of fresh hope, about three weeks before that same Assembly would complete the Republic’s constitution and usher in a new Germany. Erzberger’s words struck both chords, as he spoke frankly of the toil ahead, but also promised that the nation would be rewarded for its labors with “peacetime happiness.”

The subtitle that Erzberger chose for these remarks evoked the sense of a pastoral sermon, suggesting perhaps “The Gospel of Work,” rather than a more literal “The Word about Work.” His words clearly evinced Erzberger’s own Catholic faith, from his biblical references to his invocation of St. Benedict’s call to *ora et labora* (pray and work) to his quotation of a line from the Catholic poet and politician Friedrich Wilhelm Weber’s 1873 poem “Dreizehnlinden” that new days are built on the rubble of the old, and so we must remain aware of the past while looking forward (*rückwärtsblickend vorwärts schauen*).

Erzberger presented work as a patriotic duty as well as a biblical injunction. When he declared that the person who does not work should not eat, he seemed both to underscore the Republic’s rejection of communism and to suggest implicit limits on the extension of state welfare assistance. At the same time, though, Erzberger did not view work through an especially capitalist lens, either. He underscored, for instance, the collective value, rather than the private enrichment, that derived from work, and he particularly praised labor’s capacity to foster national unity. Furthermore, “fairness” occupied the first position in Erzberger’s trio of guiding principles: Fairness, work, and Fatherland.

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Taxation laws can admittedly only provide structure, they do not themselves yield taxes. These result only from work. Tireless work brings blessings upon both the individual worker and upon the empire. We have talked and heard a good deal about human rights. Human duties must also be reinstated among their rights. Those ancient words of the Bible ring eternally true: “Man is born to labor, and the bird to fly.”<sup>[1]</sup> This was the guiding principle of my life. I am proud of the fact that I am a hard worker, a fact none of my political opponents can deny—a hard worker, a man who has always held “ora et labora” [pray and work] up as both a blessing for the nation and the foundation of every culture. The German republic should adopt as a maxim the saying, “If any man will not work, neither let him eat.”<sup>[2]</sup> Labor is the truest expression of love for the fatherland. There is only one path to salvation for our people: while working hard, [we must] “remain aware of the past while looking forward.”

For my part, I am ready to use my office to bring about this new spirit that should carry and renew our state and people. Words enough have been exchanged. Under the old regime, a thousand sources of national consciousness and cohesion were closed off. This must change now. The call for unity and national renewal must not emanate from the diabolical rallying cry for “Hate and Revenge” but from the divine word of eternal justice. It is justice and equality that provide the foundation for society, both in international and in national life. At the national level, justice is primarily expressed in a social system of taxation.

The war cost us our wealth. The world has denied us international justice; all the more passionately and energetically do we then want to achieve social justice as our homeland begins to flourish once again and address our troubles and worries: the poor, but just, Germany. If our people, from the lowest to the highest classes, do not now go to work with all their strength, we will be hopelessly lost. The German people must finally realize this fully. You, ladies and gentlemen of the National Assembly, must work quickly and thoroughly! You can thereby give the people the purest example of fulfilling one’s patriotic duty, so that the difficult climb from the bitter suffering of war to the contentment of peace—even if somewhat tarnished—can begin at once. Justice, work, and fatherland should be the leading chord which sounds in the new Germany and heralds better times.

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## NOTES

<sup>[1]</sup> Job 5:7. Most modern translations deviate from this translation.

<sup>[2]</sup> 2 Thessalonians 3:10

Source: Matthias Erzberger, “Einführungrede und Übersicht der durch die neuen Vorlagen gekennzeichneten Budget- und Steuergestaltung,” Nationalversammlungs-Drucksachen, 50. Sitzung; reprinted in: *Reden zur Neuordnung des deutschen Finanzwesens*, Reichsminister der Finanzen, Matthias Erzberger. Berlin: Verlag von Reimar Hobbing, 1919, p. 19.

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