I am currently reading Paul Johnson’s book *Modern Times* and by modern he means the time period between 1920 and 1980. One of his interesting tidbits comes from the section on Lenin – Vladimir not John. As you are probably aware most communist regimes are not very good at doing basic things like producing food and keeping tap water from being orange but they do excel in killing their own citizens and Lenin was sort of a pioneer in this field. His great innovation was creating new classes of people and then assigning blame for various societal ailments to those newly invented classes. Probably the most famous of these were the kulaks who had the rather amorphous description of prosperous peasants. Between 1917 and 1933 the Kulaks were targeted leading to the arrest, deportation and execution of somewhere between a half a million and five million individuals who, because they were now Kulaks, were enemies of the state. This was abhorrent for many obvious reasons but at its heart it did something that went against the moral underpinnings of western society and the Judea Christian understanding of guilt and innocence. This Western or Judeo-Christian understanding of that guilt and innocence is based upon the individual and their actions not, the group to which they may or may not belong. In other words, we are not guilty because of something our uncle did in Beaumont, Texas thirty years ago. And part of the origins for this understanding are explained in today’s reading from Ezekial. In this passage we hear: “The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.”

The proverb that God refutes asserts that the sins of the parents pass down through the children. Or put another way innocence or guilt is not necessarily linked to our behavior but rather can be based on someone’s background. God, however, says that He looks upon us as individuals not as members of a group. Our behavior is ours alone and is not tainted by those with whom we share certain characteristics. But it is not just in Ezekial where we hear this message, Jesus also picks it up while in a dispute with the chief priests and elders. Being Jesus, he makes his point through the use of a parable. The parable concerns two sons who are supposed to go and work. One tells his father that he will work but does not while the other says he will not work but ends up actually working. Jesus then poses the question about who actually did the will of the father and ends the parable by saying, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.” Here like in Ezekial we are told that God’s view of us is not based on our social status nor anything else so superficial. The tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of heaven not because of where they came from, nor despite of where they came from, but rather because of their belief. We are on our own. We do not get to take credit for the virtues of others nor be punished for their vices but are judged on our belief. Now, since belief seems to be the most important thing what I want to focus on for the remaining few moments is just what Jesus means when he says the term. That is, what characteristic are we discussing when we talk about those who will enter the kingdom of heaven because of their belief? For the word belief is doing a lot of work in this construct and so it is probably worth clarifying what is meant. And to do that I want to focus on what it is and on what it is not. Let’s start with what it is not.

It is not an idol. What I mean by that is we cannot make belief a thing in and of itself. We cannot make it akin to knowing the right formula in engineering so as to figure out how big of air conditioner we need to purchase. In an idolatrous relationship things are very quid pro quo – we do this and the deity must do that. In this mindset we come to think that if we get our belief just right then God has no choice but to give us whatever we want. But people who focus on having perfect belief often find themselves in crisis when something goes wrong -- maybe they did not pray right, maybe they were listening to the wrong preacher or going to the wrong church. Correct belief is incredibly important and something for which we should strive, but it is not magic. Many churches will tell you that their understanding of God is the only correct one and that by following them you will be rewarded. But this pursuit of perfect belief is folly not just for the idolatrous nature of it but also because of the subject matter. God is too vast to allow us perfect comprehension. The other day I was trying to understand why my dog needed me to stand in a certain place in the kitchen for her to eat her breakfast. At this point I realized that if I cannot fully understand my dog how would I ever expect to fully understand God. And this does not mean that I should stop trying to grow in our knowledge of God it is just that I need to be very humble when we do. We will always be grasping and searching as in the dark. We need to think of belief not as an end in and of itself but rather as a pathway for something and that something is God.

And so now that we have covered the wrong, what is the right? What is the correct understanding of the belief Jesus talks about? For that let’s go back to what Jesus says. When he talks about the tax collectors and prostitutes and what they believed he is talking about it in the context of John the Baptist. It goes like this: Jesus chastises the chief priests and elders, saying, “For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him.” And so what was the message of John the Baptist that we are supposed to believe? Well, the message of John the Baptist was Jesus. That is what the tax collectors and prostitutes believed. They believed that Jesus was the son of God. They believed the football verse of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” They believed the one big thing. And ultimately that is what we are to remember. Understanding God and the machinations of this world are a tricky business. Yes, it is certainly a good thing to understand some theology and theories on the nature of the resurrection and all of that but if we do not start with the belief that John the Baptist preached, it is all for not. It all starts with this one thing that Jesus is the Son of God and that through him we have eternal life. That is the belief. Yes, other things come after it but this belief is the cornerstone. We are not saved by where we come from nor through a perfect understanding of God but rather through following Jesus and believing that he is who John said he was. That is what God asks and through this we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.