

A national poll this week says that only 17% of Americans think our country is on the right track. One of the problems with an opinion like this is that we often exclude ourselves from the group we are criticizing. I wonder how people would respond to this follow-up question: How about you? Are you on the right track? I suspect that more than 17% of us think that we ourselves are all right, and it's everyone else who is wrong. Yet our constitution begins with the words "We the people". We are the country. A country is on the wrong track when individuals are on the wrong track. We cannot exclude ourselves from the problem.

Sin works the same way. Whenever we sin, we are responsible for it all by ourselves, yet we contribute to a collective truth: humanity is morally weak; we want to do what is right, but we often fail. All of humanity is sinful, but that's because each of us sins.

Saint Paul explains this in today's second reading, where he is setting up a contrast between Adam who sinned and Christ who did not. According to the Book of Genesis, one of the punishments to Adam for his sin was that one day he would die. To Saint Paul, death is something that doesn't really belong in the world, and the reason it is here is because somehow humanity brought death upon itself. Referring to Adam, Paul says, "Through one man sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all [of us] inasmuch as all [have] sinned."

The news media reported the survey to show the negativity that pervades America these days. Saint Paul has another purpose. Sure he wants us to be honest about the sins that we commit and to recognize how our sins weigh us down. He wants us to be realistic that our lives will end in death. But Paul doesn't want us to be negative about ourselves or anyone else who sins. He distinguishes Christ from Adam with this beautiful statement: "The gift is not like the transgression." The gift of life in Christ far surpasses the transgression and consequences of sin. Paul goes on, "For if by the transgression of the one the many died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one man Jesus Christ overflow for the many." Sin may weigh us down as individuals, as a country, or as a world. But the grace of God in Jesus Christ overwhelms sin, overflows with mercy, and lifts us up like a wave above the ocean.

It's hard to look at our own sin, just as it's hard to look at a bad grade, a critical performance review, an accusing email, or the sorrowful face of a loved one whom we have hurt. It's hard to look at it. But we must. We must be realistic about what we have done and what it has caused. Only then can we know the extravagant mercy of God, who offers us forgiveness through the saving ministry of Jesus Christ. If we are negative about our actions in the past or in the present, now is the time to stop doing what causes harm, and start doing what brings life. The gift is not like the transgression. Grace is more powerful than sin.