

# Counseling the Doubtful

by Daniel S. Mulhall

The spiritual work of mercy “counsel the doubtful” can be understood in several different ways, depending on how we interpret the words “counsel” and “doubtful.”

It can mean that we offer insight or wisdom to someone who has questions or doubts, but it can also mean that we offer clarity where confusion reigns or candor when someone’s attitudes, values, and behaviors are questionable.

The Bible offers numerous verses that illustrate some of the ways these words can be understood. One meaning of “counsel the doubtful” is to offer advice to people who are unclear as to what they should do.

The Book of Proverbs is filled with insightful sayings that provide guidance on how people should live and make smart decisions. In addition, there are sayings that point out the value of listening to good advice.

Proverbs 11:14 says it this way: “For lack of guidance a people falls; / security lies in many counselors.” But not everyone is receptive to the

counsel of others as Proverbs 12:15 recognizes: “The way of fools is right in their own eyes, / but those who listen to advice are the wise.”

While the passages from Proverbs emphasize the importance of offering and accepting sage advice, another form of counsel is found in 2 Samuel 12 in the familiar story of David and Bathsheba.

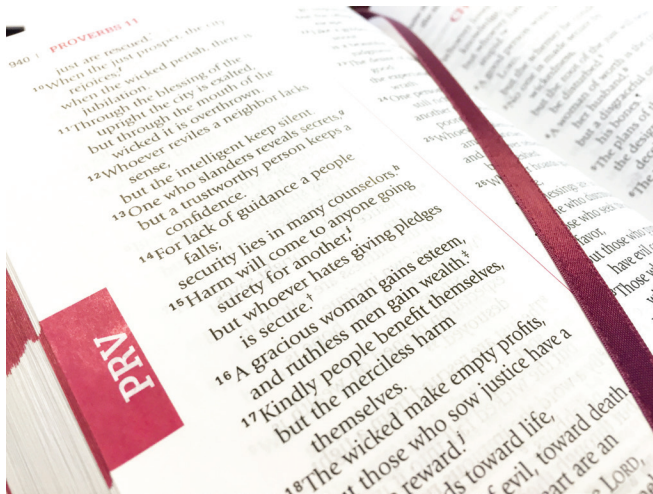
David, the king of Israel, lusts for Bathsheba, and so arranges to have her husband killed in battle. When the prophet Nathan learns of this crime, he confronts David with the sinfulness of his actions. David, forced to recognize the truth, repents and makes amends.


A different type of example of counseling can be found in the story of Jesus and Nicodemus (Jn 3:1-21). This time the objective is to help someone struggling to understand some aspect of the Christian faith.

In this passage, Jesus helps Nicodemus, a faithful man and a leader of the Jewish community, to understand the teaching of being born again. Jesus’ counsel is offered in such a way that it leads Nicodemus to a rich understanding of the teaching.

The letters of St. Paul were written as a form of counsel to the early followers of Jesus. They help people to understand. A perfect example of this is when Paul counsels on the efficacy of baptism:

“What then shall we say? Shall we persist in sin that grace may abound? Of course not! How can we who died to sin yet live in it? Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?





# Mercy in Motion

“We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” (Rom 6:1-4).

As you can see, there are a variety of ways in which Jesus’ followers may provide counsel to

those who have doubts or are doubtful. The real question is: Do we care enough about our neighbor to offer assistance in time of doubt?

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