

WD May 16, 2022

“Navigating Other People’s Ruts”

This weekend I got to spend some time with my son, Josh. We went four-wheeling. A little back story. Josh had inherited a couple of four-wheelers from his father-in-law. Neither were running. Once loved and ridden often they were eventually parked and stored and a time came when the machines started having things to fix. The list of things to fix on the machines were intended to be fixed sooner than later. And time had given way to a lot of more pressing matters like caring for spouse, children, and work. So later got later and later until the machines became like dusty museum pieces in the barn. Fast forward years later. When Josh’s father-in-law saw the gleam in Josh’s eyes for the four-wheelers it wasn’t long before they were at my house getting some updates. Josh had them running in no time. He even painted the little one black in gold in honor of Daniel’s graduation from Purdue. The bigger, red four-wheeler is the one that he rides the most and is the more powerful and stable of the two. This was the one that he rode with me this past Saturday.

Then came number three; an old Polaris 425. Bought it for 200 bucks from a guy at work who also had let it become a museum piece that needed lots of fixing. It sat in one place in the yard with a tarp over it so long that the grass stopped growing there. It needed tires, rear shocks and struts and a good tune up and viola it was running too. He bought it for me so that “Dad could go riding too.” So, I went halfzies with Josh on all the repairs. And today I got to ride it with my son, Josh at a place in Kentucky called The Dirty Turtle.

It was about a hundred-acre place in Kentucky with lots of hills and trails. We had lots of company there; motor cycles, other four-wheelers, and lots of side-by-sides (which are basically small versions of what we used to call dune-buggies.) The trails were a bit more challenging than I first expected. Many of the hills were way to steep for me to even consider, like black diamonds which are the toughest and most difficult. Many signs marked some of the tougher trails and warned the riders that the trail could be considered extreme. My brakes got a serious work out even on the hills that we did take. The trails that we rode were hard enough; lots of rocks, big enough to break things. And there were ruts, lots and lots of ruts.

The ruts were left mostly by side-by-sides which are like small cars. The ruts were made when the ground was obviously much softer and wetter. And they were on every single trail: some places were a foot and a half deep. This weekend the ground was dry and it was tough and the ruts were fixed and unyielding. The most challenging part of riding my four-wheeler was dealing with other people’s ruts. I was constantly had to work to keep from getting into the ruts. Most of the time I did well. I would stratal them, go around them, but I couldn’t always avoid them. The ruts I couldn’t avoid or fell into often forced my front tire, and therefore, my steering to go in a direction I didn’t want to go. Other people’s ruts were all over the trails. Those ruts pretty much meant I had to adjust my own riding experience to avoid them or overcome them.

Other people’s ruts will cause those around them to struggle. The challenge is to stay out of other people’s ruts. Consider now portions of Mark 7.

⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?”

⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

⁹ And he continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ ¹¹ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— ¹² then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. ¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

The traditions of the Pharisees were ruts that made the path for others harder to navigate. The path I speak of is the way of faith in Jesus. The traditions affected the parents of the Pharisees. If they were in need the tradition of Corban would allow the Pharisee to look the other way and ignore their need. It was a rut created to avoid paying mom and dad’s bills. But it would be mom and dad who fell into the ruts their sons had created; ruts they could not escape. The ruts created obstacles for parents making basic living harder to

navigate. Jesus points out the hypocrisy of Corban. He also says that it has nothing to do with the fourth commandment; “honor your father and mother.”

We cannot always avoid the ruts others create. If our spouse decides to go on a diet, we may have to endure it too. If our children are in a rut in school, with a string of bad grades, we, as parents often adjust our schedules and our efforts to help steer the child in a better direction. Many a mom has been up late the night before for projects due the next day. If our neighbor does not mow his grass that often, nor keep up the yard very well that may actually cause some strife and more work for the one who keeps a carefully manicured yard. If we struggle to get motivated to go to church our children will also be caught in that rut. By now you get the idea. If we are affected by other people’s ruts it means that we are likely traveling on the same trails—unavoidably tied to them.

The four-wheeling experience poses some interesting thoughts at this point. When I saw the ruts, I could have turned around and left. I didn’t because that would have meant missing out on sharing the experience with Josh. I would suggest that we start by remembering that our loved ones are not ruts but people we love and care about. On the trail it was nice stop and take in trees, hills, and streams all around as well. Ruts may not be going anywhere but neither are all the things worth seeing either. A rut is not the only thing that defines our loved ones. What’s more getting out of a rut of any kind usually means the Lord’s grace must do the work. It is the Lord’s job not ours to change people.

Removing ruts on the trail was not my job. My job was to navigate the ruts and while doing so find the blessings of the ride with my son. Likewise, it is sometimes the case that being with the ones we love means also having to endure some painful ruts. But we still get to decide how to navigate those ruts. First, be realistic about which ones you can handle. Some hills were well beyond my machine or its driver to handle. And my body was really sore from all the hard riding and rough trails. In Mark 7 it was pretty easy for the disciples not to wash hands in the traditional Pharisee way. This tradition was easy to avoid like some of the ruts on the trail. However, when the disciples were arrested for preaching the Gospel, they simply navigated the situation the best they could with God’s help. For us sometimes the ruts of others cannot be overcome and sometimes they can be. But you always have the choice on when to apply the brakes, or push on the gas, and where and when to turn. Eventually we get to some ground with very few ruts; level and smooth and less challenging. And it becomes quite enjoyable.

Finally, we will do well to avoid creating or deepening our own ruts which can and do affect others; especially our families. David denied his sins with Bathsheba. For the better part of a year, David fell into a rut. He pretended that it was all okay—“nothing to see here”. David became like the four-wheeler—broken, set aside somewhere with things that needed fixing but never really getting around to it. David’s decisions did great damage to the kingdom and his example led to great strife within his family. Our sins may not be as deep or linger so long as David’s with Bathsheba but we do well to remember that we always have an impact of some kind on those closest to us. Everyone has ruts. Those who are along for the ride will feel their impact at some level.

When Josh and I finished our four-wheeling the other day we were both tired and sore. The impact of the rough trails has been felt even now while I film this devotion. Interestingly, the more we road the trails the more confident we became and the better we got at navigating the rocks, hills, and ruts. Perhaps the same may be said of how we handle ruts our loved ones leave behind for us to navigate. Like Paul’s thorn in the flesh perhaps the grace of God is somewhere in those ruts too.

Pastor Matthew Woods
John 3:30

