Introduction: There are people (good, bible-believing, God-honoring, Christian people) who differ from you. They have different opinions, different views, different perspectives and different convictions. Now when it comes to differences in non-essentials, we are like the church of Rome almost two millennia ago. Paul was concerned that differences in non-essentials could lead to division, so he took time to address them. That’s what we find in Romans 14-15.

Part 1
What is the nature of differences addressed in this text? Amidst the body of Scripture, we find moral differences (1Cor. 5), gospel differences (Gal. 1) and doctrinal differences that need to be addressed (Acts 15). But in Romans 14, there is a particular type of “difference” that is not moral, doctrinal, or gospel in nature. It is a difference over something that is a non-essential of the faith. Let me see if I can clarify the nature of these differences here in Romans 14 with four descriptions.

- These differences are related to the application of one’s faith, not the existence of it.
- These differences are reasoned conclusions, not simply tradition, blind imitation, or ignorant obedience.
- These differences do not represent license or legalism.
- These differences were not about moral absolutes or doctrinal certainties.

How should we treat fellow believers who are different regarding non-essentials? Now that we understand the nature of the differences, we need to understand the appropriate response to those who are different. Paul states it both positively and negatively.

- We should accept those who are different from us.
- We should not despise the weak nor judge the strong.

Why should we accept each other with our differences? When people who are different come together in mutual submission to Christ it brings God glory. The reconciliation of adverse races, the unification of formerly disparate classes, the fellowship of both intellectual and simple, male and female, bond and free… That glorifies God and displays his wondrous wisdom in the church. We need to accept others with differences in areas of non-essentials.

- We should accept each other because God has accepted us.
- We should accept each other because God will judge us.
- We should accept each other because God will uphold us.

Summary of Part 1 Since the beginning of the church there have been differences between fellow believers over non-essentials. But God calls us to accept and embrace one another with our differences. We need to stop judging and stop looking down on fellow Christians. Differences don’t have to divide. Actually when we realize that God has accepted us, we can
find the motivation to welcome and accept one another. God will sort it all out, he will judge each of us. Those who are his (as different as many of us are) he will make us stand.

Part 2

How should we express our differences in light of our mutual acceptance? You say “okay I’ll accept them with their difference, but what’s supposed to happen now?” Although your attitude has changed, the difference remains. Although you have decided to accept one another, your paths still cross and the differences still come to the surface. What are we supposed to do?

- God’s calls upon the strong to limit their liberties.
- God tells the strong not to tear down their brother in Christ.
- God wants the strong to build up their Christian brother.

Why must the strong be the ones to defer? God calls upon the strong to practice loving deference. Now that might not sit well with you if you’re in the “strong” camp on a particular issue. You might struggle in your heart with a nagging question like, “Why must the strong be the ones to defer?” The text highlights three reasons why the strong need to defer to the weak.

- When you limit your liberty you express love.
- When you limit your liberty you honor the work of God.
- When you limit your liberty you display the values of the Kingdom.

At the end of the day, is there a right and wrong regarding these non-essential issues? We realize that interpersonally, the strong are supposed to defer to the weak, but what about the theological root in these issues?

- Theologically speaking, meat was okay to eat. I think it is important to note that Paul clearly leads the church toward correct theological knowledge and understanding even though he doesn’t demand the weak to change. Theologically there was clearly a correct and incorrect understanding, but practically it was more complex.
- Practically speaking, meat was okay for the strong sometimes and for the weak none of the time. Something that is innately right immediately becomes wrong when it is practiced with disregard for others. You who feel a greater sense of liberty in certain areas – don’t sin by expressing it in the presence of the weak. If in doubt, don’t.

Summary Part 2 At the end of the day – you may call it right or wrong, but the burden falls on the strong. Strong, you are called on to practice deference. Your responsibility is to build the weak, not grieve, trip, or destroy them. If you are willing to obey God in this matter, you will demonstrate Christ-like love, you will show honor for God’s work, and you will be a picture of kingdom ethics. Will you let love limit your liberty?

Part 3

God commands Christians to love one another, even those who are different from us. He doesn’t call us to put up with them, He commands us to love them. And not just love them for a day. He wants enduring love. Perhaps that raises a couple of questions in your mind? Maybe you are wondering how sacrificial, self-denying love can possibly endure. How can love of that sort really be maintained? Another question that might be on your mind is, “Is getting along with that different person really worth the effort?” In other words, is it really that important that we stay together and love each other, because that is going to take a lot of work.
How can you maintain this sacrificial, self-denying love for others? We are not simply told to “do it.” It’s not like Paul says, “Okay this is going to be hard, maybe seemingly impossible, but just go do it.” No, in the text we are shown how to do it. Paul gives us three insights here as to how we can have enduring, sacrificial, self-denying love for others (others who are different from us).

- We can have love for others by focusing on the example of Christ.
- We can have love for others by allowing the scriptures to give us hope.
- We can have love for others by praying for God’s supernatural work.

Is unity amidst diversity worth the effort? It’s a lot of work to be focused on Christ, to be digging into Scripture, and to be fervently praying. That’s a lot of work for unity. We should probably ask, “Is unity worth this sort of exertion?” In other words, is all the struggle with not despising, not judging, deferring, limiting, privately expressing, loving, etc., is all the struggle really worth it just so that we can have unity?

- Unity is not worth the effort (in and of itself). God does not lay these heavy demands of acceptance and deference simply so that we can live together peaceably. God doesn’t demand enduring, sacrificial, self-denying love just so that we can have placid co-existence. God’s ultimate goal for our lives is not unity. He didn’t send his Son to earth in order to provide good human relations. However, unity amidst diversity does not stand alone.
- If we accept one another God will be glorified. God is not honored if the believing community is fractured by divisions over non-essentials. He is honored when believers with all their diversity stand shoulder to shoulder and lift their voices in praise to him.

Summary Part 3 We have differences regarding non-essentials of the faith. God’s desire is that we demonstrate an attitude of mutual acceptance. When we are in each other’s company, “strong” practice deference so that there is an environment of peace through which we can build each other up. This is going to be hard work, but we have Christ’s example. We have the encouragement and endurance that come from the Word, and we have prayer. We must endeavor to be unified (in spite of our differences), for if we are, God will be glorified.

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity. ¹
“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing [this], so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope[filled] obedience,” to the Glory of God (Rom. 15:13).