Profit is the net benefit from an activity. We typically think of profit as the difference between the money a firm earns and the costs the firm incurs. Profit can also refer to the benefit a person receives from an activity minus the effort of engaging in that activity.

Some perceive the quest for profit to be in opposition to our call as Christians to build community. In fact, the quest for profit benefits society provided that society protects property rights (that is, the right of individuals to own, use, and dispose of property without coercion) and when society encourages competition (that is, an environment in which buyers and sellers can come together to exchange property without coercion).

Competition is frequently characterized from a perspective Western cultures would call “the masculine” and that Eastern cultures would call “yang”. This perspective sees competition as a conflict between competing agents in which the greater emerges victorious and the lesser withers and dies. Competition is equally well characterized from what Western cultures would call “the feminine” and Easter cultures would call “yin”. This perspective sees competition as a nurturing in which the weak, learning from and emulating the success of the strong, become strong also. The enlightened see competition as a healthy balance of conflict and nurturing. This balance of conflict and nurturing is the same that parents employ in raising children. To err too much on the side of yang is to raise an arrogant child who has no compassion for others. To err too much on the side of yin is to raise a sheltered child who has no initiative. Competition in an economy elicits this same healthy balance of compassion and initiative.

Similarly, property rights are frequently characterized from the masculine or “yang” perspective as exclusivity in which one gathers wealth to oneself and to the exclusion of others. Property rights are equally well characterized from the feminine or “yin” perspective as an opportunity for sharing. One cannot share nor give what one does not first own. Therefore, the protection of property rights is a necessary condition for the Christian acts of sharing and giving.

The purpose of this unit is to explore the nature of profit. By considering profit in terms of “balance,” you will see that it is not a benefit one obtains at the expense of another, but rather profit is an indicator of value that one has provided to another. When property rights are protected and competition is encouraged, profit becomes a measure of community-building not of exploitation.