



By Dr. Jean Uayan

# True Blessing

True blessing is not the attainment of the five good fortunes in our earthly life, but consists instead in being right with our Creator God, eternally saved by the One True Savior, and guided and comforted throughout the journey of life by the Holy Spirit.

Who doesn't want to be blessed? Everyone wants to be blessed in life, but today, from the human point-of-view, a blessing can be as meaningful as family and friends, or as mundane as Facebook and Tweeter. One local company even has this advertisement: "The family that Facebooks together stays together." This is a twisting of the slogan "The family that prays together stays together" which was invented by Al Scalpone and used by Father Patrick Peyton of the Roman Catholic Family Rosary Crusade. Some people (maybe numbering millions!) consider Facebook as/more important as/ than prayer. I kept putting off signing up with this social networking for many years. I only signed up because I wanted to keep in touch with what's happening to our alumni and to disseminate information in a faster way. Even so, I don't post photos or "likes" or comment much. I prefer the person-to-person approach via email or texts or the old-fashioned methods (letters or phone calls).

## The Five Fortunes

To the Chinese, the word for blessing is *fu* 福. This word is "often translated as 'happiness' but better rendered as 'good fortune,' 'blessing,' or 'luck,' *fu* etymologically signifies the bestowal and receipt of divine favors."<sup>1</sup> A myriad ways of ideographic and pictographic objects that are homonyms of *fu* are depicted inside and around dwellings or establishments, not only in China, but also in the Philippines. The most common is the Chinese character 福 in inverted form, which reads as depicted 福倒了 *fudaole* (*fu* is inverted) but the intention is the punning homophone 福到了

*fudaole* (*fu* has arrived).

The calligraphy 五福臨門 *wu fu lin men* (the five good fortunes have arrived at the door) is often found inside a house or over gateways. The five good fortunes, based on *Shujing* 《書經》 (*Book of History*), are: longevity (*shou* 壽), wealth (*fu* 富), health (*kangning* 康寧), love of virtues (*youhaode* 攸好德), and a natural death in old age (*kaozhongming* 考終命). Only the first two fortunes are depicted in the common folk motifs, but the other three are desired and pursued by the Chinese in general.



Longevity is often depicted by these symbols:



The backwards swastika symbol is often pronounced *wan* 萬 which means "ten thousand" and is a representation of what is bountiful or plentiful or of eternal life. Other symbols of longevity include the crane, pine tree, cypress, tortoise, deer, rocks, peaches, chrysanthemum, plum, hare and monkey. The common greeting for birthdays and for the elderly is *changshou* 長壽 or *wansui* 萬歲. Good fortune and longevity are combined in the birthday couplet: *shou bi Nanshan, fu ru Donghai* 壽比南山, 福如東海 ("May your longevity match that of the Southern Mountains and may your good fortune be as vast as the Eastern Sea").

The second fortune, wealth 富, → p. 2

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obviously refers to material riches and is often objectified by the symbol of ancient Chinese coins. In business establishments today, the ubiquitous objects used are toads with coins in their mouths, or cats with waving paw, or ancient coins tied with red ribbon.



Related to wealth is prosperity and happiness, symbolized by the double character of *xi* 喜 above. Happiness in the Chinese home can be experienced through harmonious relationships, male offspring or many children, wealth or enjoyment afforded by worldly pleasures (food, luxury, and travel).

The third fortune is health. There is no pictographic representation except that sometimes the character for health is used. Of course, if one desires longevity, then one would also desire health, for what is the meaning of having long life that is full of physical illness? Corollary to health would be success in life, represented by the word *lu* 禄 (prosperity) which is often symbolized by the carp or gold fish, because the Chinese character for fish *yu* 魚 sounds like the word *yu* 余 which means abundance, or the word for jade (*yu* 玉).



The fourth fortune is love of virtue, represented by the following characters: *ai* or love,  *de* or virtue, and *rung he* 融合, meaning harmony. “Conjugal bliss and domestic harmony are a central focus of Chinese traditional life, providing the critical framework for enjoying good fortune in many forms,” according to Knapp. Hence, invocations for household harmony are symbolically represented on both the interiors and exteriors of Chinese dwellings, such as the narcissus and orchid, which are usually shown in pairs as symbols of love. Marital bliss is depicted by a pair of fish swimming in stylized water, by flying geese, magpies or Mandarin ducks. Harmony and unity (*he he* 和合) are virtues depicted by the celestial twins, one holding a lotus in one hand, and the other a box.

The last fortune is to reach the end of a long life and die a natural death, in colloquial Chinese, *hao si* 好死. This is the best way to die – reaching old age and dying without much physical suffering. Christians who attend memorial services acknowledge the blessing of this type of death and often testify for relatives who were able to experience it.

Even a cursory analysis of these five fortunes easily

reveal that in the Chinese mind, good fortune is related to the avoidance, lack of, or overcoming of suffering. Longevity, good health and even good death relate to avoidance or absence of physical suffering. Wealth and prosperity relate to the absence of poverty and deprivations. Harmony and virtues are opposite to disharmony, which is a reality in life that deprives one of peace of mind, heart and soul (the absence of emotional and mental anguish). It is no wonder that the Chinese are attracted to the Buddhist and Confucian religions, as their central tenet is the avoidance of suffering attained through the pursuit of harmonious relationships. But it is also evident that the starting point of attaining such good fortune is on the physical or human level, not basically from one's innermost being or spiritual depths.

### The Blessings of Jesus

Christ offers so much more than good fortune to humankind: starting from one's innermost being, there is the blessing of being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit and the renewal of the whole being through the new life brought about by the substitutionary suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross, leading up to the hope and reality of eternal life, not just long life or immortality. The essence of true harmony is the restoration of one's right relationship with God the Creator, leading to a righteous stature and ability to pursue virtue, not through one's own strength or intelligence, but aided by the guidance and wisdom given and modeled by the Perfect Being. The main enemy of man is not suffering but sin. Human sin directly causes disharmony (criminal and moral) and poverty (physical and spiritual) on earth, and indirectly brings about pollution and health issues. The Chinese mindset is actually pre-disposed toward what Christ and Christianity offer because of its desire for “good fortune.” True blessing is not the attainment of the five good fortunes in our earthly life, but consists instead in being right with our Creator God, eternally saved by the One True Savior, and guided and comforted throughout the journey of life by the Holy Spirit.

The Beatitudes proclaimed by Jesus Christ in Matthew 5: 3-12 assure the man who has been set right with God that in his life journey, he is truly a blessed, i.e., deeply and supremely happy, man (*you fu* 有福). Jesus said: *Blessed are the poor in spirit and those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (vv. 3,10). Contrary to the idea that earthly suffering is a sign of bad fortune, Jesus taught that for those who are in the heavenly kingdom, physical and other forms of poverty or persecution can lead to total dependence on God and this is a blessing. This is far better than being rich and prosperous. But it does not imply that all Christians are poor or always suffering.

*Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted* (v. 4). This again brings the reality of human

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