It is an expression of Jesus awareness of man's stupidity. They know not what they do:
(a) over some of the most shameful tragedies of history [hang²] these words.⁸
(b) Individually, I feel like saying Father be merciful to me a fool⁹

8 Fosdick, "Crucified by Stupidity," in *The Hope of the World*, p 223 “over the most shameful tragedies of history, as over the cross of Christ, the judgment stands ‘They know not what they do.’”
9 Cf Luke 18:13 In his sermon notes, King concluded at this point, “A second lesson comes to us from Jesus prayer on the cross. It is an expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual blindness. ‘They know.’ Blindness was their trouble, enlightenment was their need. Jesus was nailed to the cross not simply by badness but also by blindness. The men who [en] ‘crucify him’ were not bad men but rather blind men. This tragic blindness expresses itself in many ominous ways in our own day. Some men feel that war is the answer to the problems of the world. Sincerity & conscientiousness in themselves are not enough. Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity. The church must urge men to be kindhearted & sincere” (King, *Love and Forgiveness*, 20 May 1964)

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

“The Seeking God”

[2 October 1960]
[Atlanta, Ga]

Referring to Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep, King declares God’s active concern and love for every individual. “Every man from a [bass] black to a treble white is significant on God’s keyboard.”

Based on the parable of the Lost Sheep

Introduction—There is a desperate question on the lips of every individual. It is a poignant insistent question. In no life can the question be finally dismissed. The question is simply this—What is God like? “The Power that rolls the planets on their course and draws the line of death across our human days—Who is He?” “Our dearest faith, our ghastliest doubt”—What is he like?² The majestic Power that is the heartbeat of the cosmos—Who is he? This is the desperate, stinging, poignant question flowing from the lips of every man.

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¹ This sermon was King’s announced topic for this date (Ebenezer Baptist Church, Press release, “The Seeking God” King Jr’s Topic at Ebenezer,” 1 October 1960)
² Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p 179 “What is God like?” The Power Who rolls the planets on their course and draws the line of death across our human days—Who is He? ‘Our dearest faith, our ghastliest doubt”—what is He like?”
On this first page of a handwritten draft for the sermon “The Seeking God,” based on the parable of the lost sheep, King writes, “What is God like? . . . This is the desperate, stinging, poignant question flowing from the lips of every man.” Jesus, King says, answers that God “is like a Good Shepherd.”
Jesus answered the question He [answered?] it in terms that every man of his generation could understand "God," he says, "is like a Good Shepherd." Indeed he is the Cosmic Shepherd that lead us into this pasture of mortal life. He knows that folly by which we wander. He seeks us through pain and peril. And finally he leads us through the Valley of the Shadow. His lifted rod our guide. This aspect of God's nature is set forth so beautifully in the parable of the lost sheep.

Another introduction can be "where is God" as Carlyle said "God sits in Heaven and does nothing."

The basic message of this parable is set forth in three points.

I. It emphasizes man's tragic tendency to become lost. The tragedy of being lost is nothing more tragic than to see a person who has wandered so far from the fold of his destiny that he ends up in the maze of present circumstances, with complete loss of sense of direction.

(a) Now notice that this sheep was not lost by deliberate choice. There is nothing in the parable to indicate that the sheep consciously strayed away from the fold. He was probably just nibbling sweet grass. Like the sheep, men follow the lure of the moment—this transitory thrill of pleasure, that passing enrichment—until at last they reach the deep darkness of a lost night.

As a counselor of people I have come to see that most personal problems do not grow out of a deliberate choice.

(1) The alcoholic starts as a social drinker—Yale Report.

(2) Dope addiction starts in the quest for a new experience.

(3) Marriage infidelity starts in the enjoyment of being flattered.

II. The second basic point brought out in this parable is that God is unwearily persistent in seeking the lost. Indeed this is the crux of the parable. It only deals with the lostness of man in order to reveal the amazing propositions of God's seeking love.

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3 Of John 10:11, 14
4 Of Psalm 23:4. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 179. "He is like a shepherd! He led us into this pasture of mortal life. He knows the folly by which we wander, drawn by this pleasant tuft and that lush water-course, until the night is on us and the mountains rise like walls of rock. He seeks us through pain and peril. He will lead us at the last through the Valley of the Shadow. His lifted rod our guide!"

5 Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 165. King inserted this reference to Thomas Carlyle in a second pen.


7 Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 180. "Sometimes they are lost like sheep, not from viciousness or deliberate choice but from weak will and heedlessness."

8 Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 180. "Like sheep, men follow the zest of the moment—this transitory thrill of pleasure, that passing enrichment—until they reach darkness and the brink of the precipice!"

9 King may be referring to information from a 1959 Yale University conference on alcoholism (Program, 'Ministers' conference on the problems of alcohol,' 18 October–20 October 1959).

10 King added these bracketed lines in a second pen.
We tend to think that the search is on man's part, but it is the other way around. Prayer, for instance, is really man's response to God.

(b) Aristotle's God

(c) God is not an absentees God. He is not the God that sits in his heaven and does nothing. Throughout the Bible, from the beginning of the Old Testament to the end of the New, we find God trudging [through] the hedges and highways of history seeking to find the lost.

Finally, this parable teaches the endless preciousness of the individual to God. "There is joy in heaven over one sinner."

(a) There is so much in our modern life to refute this principle

(1) men and women [hovered] up in big cities & big industrial areas

(2) Communism as a threat to individualism

(3) Out of this emphasis of the worth of the individual grew democracy

(b) The Christian gospel is committed, once and for all, to the worth of the individual, By his cross, Christ has bound all men into an inextricably bond of brotherhood, and stamped on all men the indelible imprint of preciousness.

(c) All men are significant. The one lost is as significant as the ninety and nine. Every man from a base black to a treble white is significant on God's keyboard. The important thing about a man is not his specificity, but his fundamentum.

In the final analysis this parable tells us that there is somebody in the universe who cares. This is what the hymn writer meant when he said, Jesus cares.

AD CSKC Sermon file, folder 51, "The Seeking God (Parable of Lost Sheep)"

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11 King's subject index file contained a notecard in which he cited "Knudson, DOG, 298" below the title "Aristotle's God" (King, Notecards on Aristotle, U.S. policy on Asia, Atheism, and Augustine, 1951-1955). Albert C. Knudson argued that Aristotle's God was not a personal god. "He is a shining ideal which attracts the world, and in this sense the world loves him, but he does not love the world. He stands aloof from it. There is no reciprocal intercourse between him and men" (Knudson, The Doctrine of God [New York: Abingdon Press, 1950], pp. 281, 298).


14 In a 1955 published sermon Robert J. McCracken remarked, "Aggrey, that great Negro Christian, said, 'You can play some sort of tune on the white keys of a piano, you can play some sort of tune on the black keys of a piano, but to produce real harmony you must play both the black and white keys.'" (McCracken, "Discrimination—The Shame of Sunday Morning," The Pulpit [February 1955].)

15 James E. Kwesigye Aggrey, born in Gold Coast, became an AME Zion Church minister and theologian after migrating to the United States in 1898. King added the last two sentences in a second pen. He may be referring to Frank E. Graeff's 1901 hymn "Does Jesus Care?" "Oh yes, He cares, I know He cares, / His heart is touched with my grief, / When the days are weary, the long nights dreary, / I know my Saviour cares"